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## EDITORIAL

The EBHR was established in 1991 by Richard Burghart in Heidelberg, in cooperation with colleagues in Paris and London. For the first twelve years of its existence, it was printed in, and distributed from, Europe, but since 2004 it has been printed in, and distributed from, Kathmandu, in cooperation with Social Science Baha.

The arrangement has worked out very well, and the Social Science Baha has always displayed the highest academic standards. This is only to be expected, since its mandate involves “promoting and enhancing the study of and research in the social sciences in Nepal” (from its homepage: <http://www.soscbaha.org/>).

As we go to Press, there are newspaper reports that a constitutional body in Nepal, the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority, has encouraged the Social Welfare Council to investigate the Social Science Baha. Although we do not wish to comment on the details of the case, we do wish to state for the record that in our experience, the Social Science Baha has always displayed the greatest financial and scientific integrity. We thank them for their efforts, and look forward to many more years of fruitful cooperation.

- The Editors



## **A Vehicle for Agency: Rath Rituals and the Construction of Himalayan Devtas as Complex Agents**

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### **Field Diary, May 1, 2009**

The two *raths* [palanquins] of Goshali Nag and the goddess Hadimba were dancing in the temple ground of Goshal village. Just as Hadimba was about to head back to Old Manali, the Nag's *rath* began spiraling like crazy, leaning sideways and running hectically around.

Lotram: Do you know what this means?

EH: No.

Lotram: It means that the Nag Devta doesn't want Hadimba to leave. He wants her to stay.

EH: And will she stay?

Lotram: I don't know, let's see. It is up to her.

We looked down at the road beneath the platform, where Hadimba was slowly moving away. She stopped. An intensely possessed man was holding her *rath* while jumping up and down. He pulled the *rath* back. Hadimba turned around and came back to the platform. All the people ran after her and returned to the temple ground. The possessed man kept holding on to one of the *rath*'s poles, jumping violently, and making "hhrrrrr..." noises. He kept shouting, "I won't go! I won't go!"

People from the crowd began shouting all kinds of things at the *rath* and discussed among themselves whether Hadimba should leave or not. Lotram, who was still standing next to me, suddenly moved forward and said, "If she doesn't want to go then she should stay. Why should she go if she doesn't want to? [Addressing the *rath*:] If you want to stay then stay!" People nearby nodded in agreement. The two *raths* began running around wildly again. At some point, Beluram, oracle of the god Manu,

grabbed the poles of the Nag's *rath* and went into trance.<sup>1</sup> He began speaking: "I came here today, didn't I? I stayed all day, didn't I? Tomorrow I need to go to visit the village of Shlin. I can't stay here tonight. I need to go. I will come again next year and stay all night. Now I need to go." This seemed to settle the discussion. The musicians started playing again, and the two *raths* left.

Seeing the *raths'* wild running, the possessed man's violent jumping, and the crowd's enthusiastic involvement, it struck me that whatever was going on here could not be easily explained (let alone explained away). The people carrying the *raths* kept changing; the participants had no apparent agenda (Lotram had no clear stand on the matter until he suddenly decided to intervene); the possessed man was not possessed on a regular basis. Could the gods really be controlling these *raths*? [...] I remember (my friend) Prem saying that 95% of the people here believe in the gods. I can definitely see how this is possible. The gods in these regions seem so alive. They are agents no doubt! [...] They have a shape, they move around, they make decisions, they talk, they dance, they craze around, they're happy...<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

That was an excerpt from my fieldnotes, taken during research in the Kullu Valley of the West Indian Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh in 2009. It describes a common sort of interaction between two village deities and their communities of followers during a local village festival. Such deities can be found throughout the Central and Western Indian Himalayas. Referred to as *hamara pahari devi-devata* system (our mountain system of goddesses and gods) (Sutherland 2004: 89), *hamara*

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas Beluram is usually possessed by the god Manu, in this case it seemed that he was channeling the goddess Hadimba, since her own oracle, Tuleram, was not well at the time and could not do so himself.

<sup>2</sup> This is a slightly revised version of my original field notes from May 1, 2009. I conducted research in the Kullu Valley from 2009 to 2011 and again in 2015, and I am grateful to the following institutions for supporting my research at different stages: American Institute of Indian Studies; Selva J. Raj Endowed International Dissertation Research Fellowship; Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life at Columbia University; and The Israel Science Foundation. Unless otherwise noted, the conversations quoted here were translated into English by me from Hindi and Pahari, a term referring to the Hindi dialects spoken in the Indian Himalayas. I underline English words that were used in Hindi sentences.

*devidevata sanskriti* (our culture of goddess and gods) (Elmore 2005: 20), *devta ka raj* (government by deity) (Moran 2007: 149; Sutherland 1998),<sup>3</sup> or simply, the *devta* system, this fascinating institution has been observed by scholars across the region.<sup>4</sup> In the broadest sense, the *devta* system designates the organization of various aspects of life in the Indian Himalayas around the figures of village deities. The latter influence the religious, socio-political, economic, agricultural, and even environmental dimensions of life in the area. They are involved in individual and household matters, as well as in those of the village, region, and kingdom. Living in a region whose mountainous topography encouraged the formation of small, scattered village communities, the *devtas* have been instrumental not only in maintaining the internal integrity of these small socio-political units, but also in binding them together in all sorts of ways. Peter Sutherland summarizes it as follows:

In consultations such as these, Pahari [mountain] deities intervene in everyday life in order to determine the best course of action to take in all kinds of affairs. In personal matters, deotas diagnose misfortune, heal sickness, welcome brides, bless first-born males, settle legal disputes, or mete out punishment in the form of dos. In communal matters, deotas select new temple officials, formulate group policy, distribute grazing and irrigation rights, define territory, fix dates for festivals, issue invitations to other gods, engage in diplomatic relations, and formerly waged war with their magic. In ecological and cosmic matters, moreover, deotas control the weather (Nags in particular have power over rain), ensure the fertility of crops and flocks, protect against demonic disorder, maintain the presence of life-giving shakti in their domains, and predict the course of the coming year.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This phrase is already in the title of Sutherland's dissertation: "Travelling Gods and Government by Deity: An Ethnohistory of Power, Representation and Agency in West Himalayan Polity" (Sutherland 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Sutherland observes that the practice of government by deity can be found "[t]hroughout Himachal Pradesh, from Chamba in the west, through Kullu, to Bashahr and the Simla Hills States in the east, then over the border to Jaunsar-Bawar and Garhwal" (Sutherland 1998: 38-9).

<sup>5</sup> (Sutherland 2006: 101). As can be gathered from the name of the system—*devi devta*—the deities involved are of both genders and can be either female (*devi*) or male (*devta*). From

How are we to understand this Indian Himalayan institution? Who exactly are these *devtas*? How did they come to be? How do they operate? And how can we interpret their meaning? A fascinating answer to these questions has been offered in recent years by William Sax and other scholars working in the Indian Himalayas. The *devis* and *devtas*, Sax argues, are “non-human ritual agents” (Sax 2006: 478) who “articulate the intentions of the community, manifesting its complex agency” (Ibid: 481).

Let us take a closer look at this interpretation. Ronald Inden introduced the concept of complex agency to the study of India in his 1990 volume *Imagining India*. He argues there that early Indology promoted two misconceptions of India. The first, borrowed from Western social science, was the interpretation of the Indian social body as a machine or an organism—a bounded entity made of atomistic parts that all work in unison. The other misconception was the identification of caste, village, Hinduism, and kingship as the major parts constituting the Indian social machine. These four institutions, thought to be timeless, unchanging and governed by fixed, eternal rules, were seen as the main forces shaping and orienting the lives and actions of individual persons. Caste, for example, was understood as an eternal hierarchizing principle that structured the static and ahistorical Indian social order from its conception. In Indological accounts, Inden argues, these four institutions were thus essentialized, eternalized, and made into the real agents working in Indian society. This, in turn, robbed India of its history and its people of their individual, social, political and, ultimately, historical agency.

In order to remedy these misrepresentations, Inden turns to the philosopher R.G. Collingwood, from whom he borrows two key concepts: *complex agency* and *scale of forms*. Indians, Inden explains, have no less agency than any other people around the globe. They act both as individual agents and in agentive groups — families, castes, and other social associations. It is these groups that Inden calls complex agents, since the individuals constituting them operate within them *collectively*,

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here onwards I will use the term *devta* generically, to designate both male and female deities. When referring specifically to a female goddess I will use the term *devi*.



acting upon their world purposively, reflectively, and effectively as a *group*. These agents are complex in several ways: First, they are compound entities made of various discrete parts. Second, they are not unified, homogenous, or static, and the humans who constitute them do so while interacting with each other in all sorts of ways, ranging from collaboration to conflict. Third, these complex agents interact among themselves, and thereby make and remake each other in the process. Ultimately, the whole social world is constituted by a great number of agents, individual and institutional alike, which interact with one another and shape each other in the process.

Accordingly, the social system or body politic that is constituted in this interactive process cannot be seen as a machine anymore. It is composed of entities that are not distinct but overlapping, not stable but provisional, not homogenous but engaging in conflict as well as cooperation. Think of political parties, business companies, sports clubs, labor unions, and village assemblies, and of the ways in which they interact and thereby constitute the social world. Inden, following Collingwood, calls this dynamic and complex model of interaction, which characterizes every social system, a “scale of forms”—a mode of social organization that is an assemblage of manifold, overlapping, competing, and changing human practices. A social system is made of interacting complex agents, each of which is itself a scale of forms.<sup>6</sup> Inden notes that, in the Indian scale of forms, gods should be seen as complex agents but, unfortunately, he does not develop this observation much further.<sup>7</sup>

In a series of later publications, William Sax develops Inden’s conceptualization of gods as complex social agents. He reminds us that Inden was not alone in advocating the need to acknowledge the agency of supernatural beings in Indian history,<sup>8</sup> and that this is in line with

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<sup>6</sup> Inden’s observations here have much in common with those made by proponents of the Actor-Network-Theory. See, for example, Latour 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Inden makes this observation as part of his analysis of the imperial formation of the 8th-10th century Rashtrakutas as a scale of forms. Describing the chapter in the introduction to the book, he writes: “I will also be dealing with some agents, to wit, the gods Vishnu and Siva ... whom some might wish to dismiss as agents ... We may take such agents to be real to the extent that complexes of discursive and nondiscursive practices constitute and perpetuate them, even if some would deny their reality (2000: 27).”

<sup>8</sup> Sax refers mainly to Chakrabarty 2000, but that of Guha (1988) and Prakash (1990), on which Chakrabarty draws, are also highly relevant.

observations made more generally in the field of anthropology, which “has a long tradition of writing about indigenous concepts of disembodied or non-embodied agency—the agency of ancestors, spirits, gods, winds, and so forth” (2006: 478).

Sax provides us with a succinct and straightforward definition of agency, which he sees as “the ability to transform the world” (ibid: 474). He then distinguishes between *social actors* and *social agents*: Whereas the former are “particular, conscious, embodied and intentional beings,”—that is, humans—the latter “may be non-human or human, complex or individual” (ibid: 477). Thus, while humans are both actors and agents—they act in the world and have the capacity to transform it through their actions—social institutions such as families, corporations, churches, ancestors, and gods, are non-actor agents. They do not have the capacity to act in the world themselves, yet their capacity to transform the world is achieved through their ability to shape the actions of humans. This, as Sax notes, has nothing too mystical or religious about it:

In fact, we deal with complex agents all the time. Universities, trade unions, and bridge clubs are all agents that have been consciously designed to accomplish collective purposes. If, despite the pronounced individualism of the business world, corporations can unproblematically be regarded as agents—that is, as legal persons who own property, hire and fire employees, report and distribute profits, and so forth—then surely we can regard deities and ancestors as “real” agents in those societies where their existence and their powers are axiomatic (2009: 94)

An important aspect separating human agents from complex ones is the *location* of this agency. Whereas human agency is located in the person, complex agency is distributed in networks. In fact, this is a major reason that this sort of agency is termed “complex” to begin with. Not only complex agency, but also cognition and knowledge, is “distributed amongst individuals, families, clans, and other kinds of associations” (Sax 2006: 481), and here as well there is nothing particularly mystical or supernatural:

[T]heories of distributive cognition ... show that knowledge of complex systems is distributed among numerous agents, no single one of which has knowledge of the complete system. The classic source is Edwin Hutchins's *Cognition in the Wild*, which analyzes various forms of navigation as systems of distributed cognition. The knowledge of how to land a passenger airplane, for example, is distributed among pilot, air traffic controller, and the array of computers used by both (ibid: 479)

Sax stresses that a major arena where complex agency is constituted is public rituals, where “the agency distributed among other persons, relationships, and social institutions is articulated and made manifest” (ibid: 478). Thus, for example, a judge sentencing a criminal in a public courtroom ritual is articulating the verdict of the legal system—a complex agent whose knowledge and cognition is distributed among lawyers, law books, police, and “a whole set of antecedent relationships and institutions” (ibid: 479). The verdict articulated by the judge is produced by the collective effort, collaboration, and contribution of the different elements constituting the legal system, and emerges from the knowledge and cognition distributed among its parts. Thus the judge (a social actor) enables the agency of the legal system (a complex agent) to transform the world (incarcerate the criminal) through her action. Importantly, this act of sentencing performed in a public courtroom ritual is only one among many ritualistic procedures that constitute the complex agency of the legal system as a whole. Other rituals include swearing the judge into office (thereby conferring on her the right and power to articulate the system’s decision), the presentation of evidence in the trial, the lawyers’ closing speeches, etc. Other organizations and groups have their own ritual procedures for articulating distributed agency.<sup>9</sup>

Before we proceed, let us briefly summarize what we have learned so far about deities as complex agents. According to Inden, earlier

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<sup>9</sup> Here is how Sax puts it: “[A]ll organizations and societies, from the local Bridge Club to the United Nations, develop means for articulating complex agency ... while agency itself is always distributed throughout a network of people, social relations, and institutions, the authority to articulate the complex agency of the group is usually conferred by public rituals, such as elections, inaugurations, enthronements, and the like (2006: 481).

Indologists understood India's social agents to be not its living human persons but its essentialized institutions, such as caste and village. These institutions were thought to be governed by timeless and unchanging rules, which alone shaped and directed the actions of humans, who were thus portrayed as deprived of any political, economic, or historical agency. But as Inden, Sax, and others argue, India's real agents, like everywhere else, have always been of two kinds: humans and institutions (complex agents), whose agency, cognition, and knowledge are distributed in networks, and which are structured as—and operate within—a scale of forms. Public rituals are a key arena where these complex agents, which in India include gods, are established and where their agency—that is, their capacity to transform the world—is realized through the actions of humans.

### **Divine Raths of the Kullu Valley**

As it turns out, such a model is especially apt for the Indian Himalayas. Village goddesses and gods function here as complex agents who represent their communities both symbolically and politically. Sutherland, whose study of the *devta* system in the former Bushahr kingdom of the Shimla Hills is a comprehensive account of the ways in which tutelary deities participate in the production at multiple levels of the sociopolitical system, observes that “tutelary symbolism articulates the collective identity, power and agency of different kinds of local group” (1998: 145). Daniele Berti speaks of village gods in the Kullu Valley as “social actors” (by which she means social agents, if we follow Sax's important distinction), who communicate their will through their oracles, participate in village life, and make decisions regarding it (2009: 313-4). Sax notes that in these regions, “[w]hen a decision must be made about when to sow and when to reap, or when the gods are at war and strategic decisions must be made, or when a dispute between the divine kingdoms or amongst families or factions within them must be settled, gods articulate the intentions of the community, manifesting its complex agency” (2006: 481). Other scholars reach similar conclusions.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the *devtas'* collective agency is taken in the Indian Himalayas to its logical conclusion. An essential and somewhat unique aspect of

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example Singh 2006; Luchesi 2006.

the *devta* system is that village deities are considered the rulers of their communities. They are constituted as divine sovereigns who rule people and territory, either directly through their oracles, or indirectly through the temple administrators or the kings of the polity, on whom they confer their authority to act as rulers. The ideology behind this system of *devta ka raj* (rule by deity) and the practical ways in which it operates were discussed at length in a special issue of the European Bulletin of Himalayan Research dedicated to the study of “Divine Kingship in the Western Himalayas” (EBHR 2006: numbers 29-30). Brigitte Luchesi describes how, during the annual Dasahara festival in Kullu, Lord Raghunath, the valley’s main deity, “is shown as a supreme commander and king prepared for war ... accompanied by the *raja* [the human king] and by village deities from all over the Kullu region” (ibid: 66). Vidal shows how lineage goddesses identified with territories of dominant clans demand revenge and ritualized headhunting of rival clans, in what has important implications for the reinforcement of the collective identity of the clan (ibid). And Sutherland, proposing a somewhat Durkheimian interpretation, observes that the group’s collective agency is imagined here as *shakti*—the divine power possessed or embodied by the *devta*—to which individual group members are subjected. Communities thus construct their sovereignty in divine terms and “become historical political agents as subjects of their own self-objectification [as gods]” (ibid: 108).

But how exactly are these Himalayan *devtas* so constituted? What are the means through which they are established as complex agents that represent their communities and are considered their sovereigns? In what cultural arenas do these processes take place? It should not surprise us that a deity, like other complex social agents, is established primarily through public rituals. This is all the more likely given that the *devta* embodies the political power and agency of the group and represents its collective identity. Public rituals function as sites for the creation of communal identities: This insight goes as far back as Robertson Smith, who sees rituals as stimulating feelings of community that consolidate the group, and Durkheim, who famously argues that collective representations, which symbolize and produce the shared



**The *rath* of Hadimba Devi and Manu Rishi (photo by Ehud Halperin)**

identity of the group, are created during intense ritual assemblies. Whereas Durkheim sees these collective representations as the product of socially undifferentiated groups, forged during rituals that bring about social unity and solidarity, later scholars understand such representations to be created by groups that are internally divided along lines of class, gender, etc., in rituals that may also express conflict and desire for change, and which therefore mark an internally differentiated and not monolithic communal identity. Still, the idea that public rituals are sites for the display and reproduction of social cohesion and identity is widely accepted.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, (Sax 2002: 13). Interestingly, in a recent volume about ritual and identity, the editors observe that, though “intricate relationship exists between rituals as performative practices and processes of identity formation ... the matter is rarely made the focus of research” (Köpping, Leistle, and Rudolph 2006: 11). One of the reasons they provide for this dearth is that the “idea that rituals have something to do with individual and collective definitions of self mostly stays on the level of knowledge that is taken for granted” (ibid., emphasis mine). They also observe that “the reluctance of social scientists to tackle the problem directly seems to originate from a deliberate avoidance, which is easy to understand. Even considered separately, the two terms ‘ritual’ and ‘identity’ are

A particularly important ritual site at which *devtas* are established as complex agents is the *rath*. Literally a “chariot,” but in reality a palanquin, the *rath* is a highly popular and much-loved manifestation of Himalayan *devtas*. Whereas the manifestation of the *devta* in a temple is static, the *rath* is an incarnation of a rather more dynamic nature. *Raths* come in different styles, but they all share a basic shape comprising a wooden structure called *kursi* (chair) and attached long polls (*boi*), which devotees carry on their shoulders when transporting the *devta* around.

This wooden base is decorated with additional materials and objects, such as jewelry, cloths, flowers, and silver or gold umbrellas. Especially important, and probably the most distinguishable feature of local *raths*, are the *mohras*—metal, mask-like faces that are affixed to the chair and that give the *devtas* their human-like appearance. The *rath*, we should note, is not kept in this form throughout the year but is assembled (*rath pidhna*) especially for festive occasions and then taken apart as the celebrations conclude. Unlike elsewhere in India where gods are worshiped in ritual vehicles—either in palanquins (*pālki*) or in wheeled chariots (*rath*)—in Kullu the temple *murti* of the *devta* is not usually taken out of the temple and placed in the *rath*.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the whole assembled complex is itself considered the manifestation of the deity, whose presence occupies it following a series of evocative rituals. Once assembled and pervaded by the *devta*’s presence, that *rath*, carried on peoples’ shoulders, begins to move. It dances in the temple compound, marches through the village, circumambulates it on certain occasions, and travels to visit neighboring *devtas* during their annual village festivals. In short, the *rath* does not contain a temple image or idol (*murti*) but rather fulfills the function of an image by itself embodying the deity.

In what follows I show how the rituals of building, maintaining, and transporting the palanquins of the *devtas* in the Kullu Valley are

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real conceptual nightmares” (ibid). In many ways, my aim in this paper is to contribute to this discussion by showing how the rituals of the *devtas*’ palanquins contribute to the formation of their communities’ collective identities.

<sup>12</sup> This is the case, for example, in the famous Ratha Yatra in Puri, during which the idols of the Jagannath trio—Jagannath (Krishna), his brother Balabhadra (Balarama), and their sister Subhadra—are taken out of their temple and carried in enormous wooden carts along the city’s main street. The one exception in the Kullu Valley is the chariot procession of lord Raghunath, held during the Dasahara, when the god’s *murti* is placed in the wheeled cart.

instrumental in establishing these deities as complex communal agents. Although several scholars working in the region have noted the importance of the gods' palanquins, they mostly focus on the rituals performed after the *raths* have already been built and are interacting with each other. Sax, for example, shows how the movement of palanquins was central to a recent dispute between two communities in the upper Tons valley of Garhwal. In that case, the followers of a *devta* named Duryodhana prevented the *rath* of Karna, a deity of a competing community, from crossing their lands, which were considered Duryodhana's territory. Eventually Duryodhana's followers allowed Karna's *rath* to enter, but only on the condition that his devotees carried it quietly and without beating their drums and playing their horns, as is customary (2002: 171-2). Berti, to take another instance, shows how present-day political tensions between two communities in the Kullu district are displayed and intensified during the Dasahara festival, held annually in the capital of the valley. The palanquins of the *devtas* of the two rival communities compete for a ritually respected position near the chariot of Lord Raghunath, the valley's main deity. At one point during this ongoing struggle, the police had to subdue the two parties, who physically battled for the preferred position (Berti 2009: 128-9).

A most comprehensive study of *raths* in the former Bushahr kingdom is also offered by Sutherland. Arguing that "[t]he gods in their palanquins clearly embody the local sovereignty of the peasant communities that transport them" (2006: 116), his study is dedicated to showing how the communities' *raths* fit into the scale of forms that is the mountain kingdom. He describes how the palanquins define territories by circumambulating them, create affinities with other communities by regularly interacting with their palanquins in festive occasions, and participate in the legitimation of the mountain kingdom itself by visiting its capital during the annual Dasahara festival and paying their ritual respects to the royal deity seated in her own ritual chariot (Sutherland 1998, 2003). As can be seen, the main focus in these studies is the behavior of the *devtas*' palanquins once they are already built and engaged in *inter-communal* and *extra-local* ritual practices.<sup>13</sup> Although I will mention such rituals towards the end of this essay, my

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<sup>13</sup> One important exception is Berti 2004, which I will discuss below.



goal is rather to focus on the ritual production of the *rath* and the *intra-village* practices that it involves. These, I argue, are central to the constitution of the *devta* as a complex communal agent.

In order to do this, I analyze the palanquin rituals of one particular goddess worshiped in the Kullu Valley: Hadimba Devi of Manali. Primarily identified nowadays with a well-known character from the Mahabharata epic, the forest demoness Hidimba, who married the Pandava hero Bhim and mothered the great warrior Ghatotkaca, Hadimba Devi is enshrined in a pagoda-like temple situated in a majestic deodar grove at the outskirts of Dhungri village, a few minutes' walk from the tourist town of Manali. Hadimba is considered one of the most important deities in the region and is credited with the crowning of the founding father of the traditional ruling dynasty of the valley. Her *rath* participates in a great number of rituals throughout the year, which draw large crowds of participants and onlookers. Importantly, Hadimba shares her palanquin with a *devta* named Manu Rishi, who is the presiding deity of the nearby village of Old Manali. The nature and history of the relationship between these two *devtas* and between their respective villages is worthy of attention. But for the purposes of this discussion, I treat the two communities as one, since they form a single *pancayat*<sup>14</sup> and have worshiped Hadimba and Manu together since at least the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. I will also consider the *rath* primarily as Hadimba's since, although it is kept and assembled in Old Manali, devotees identify it with her more often than they do so with Manu.

In what follows I present the main rituals that produce the corporeal manifestation of the goddess Hadimba, which are key to establishing her as a complex agent. I divide these rituals into three analytical categories: (1) collective production; (2) substantive transactions; and (3) integrative legitimation. These correspond with Inden's three characteristics of complex agents mentioned above, namely that they are (1) compounded entities, which are (2) fragmented and constructed in interaction between their inner parts, and which (3) continuously make and remake one another.

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<sup>14</sup> *Pancayat* (a council of five) is a traditional institution that performs all sorts of functions in village life, especially arbitration of disputes. In this case the term indicates that Dhungri and Old Manali share one such village council and function as a single political unit for various purposes.

Before we proceed, it is important to note that the institution of the *rath* is neither timeless nor unchanging. New *raths* come into being while existing ones fall into decay; they can merge with one another or split apart; new processional routes can be created and older ones forgotten; and changing social and political interests may alter existing ritual patterns or give birth to new ones.<sup>15</sup> All these historical alterations and developments, however, seem to have taken place in Kullu *within* the ritual framework of the *rath* institution, which appears to be rather stable on the whole. In other words, while the *rath* rituals undergo all sorts of transformations, the socioreligious and cultural framework they provide remains relatively stable. Accordingly, in what follows, I describe what appear to be the more durable elements in the ritual apparatus of the *raths*. In doing so, I do not mean to deny it its history but to explore its enduring foundations.

### (1) Collective Production

On the material level, palanquins in the Kullu valley are first and foremost a collection of things. As mentioned above, they are made of metal faces, silver and gold objects, jewelry pieces, cloths, flowers, and ritual powders—all affixed to a chair-like wooden structure. All these components must be brought together and assembled before the deity can manifest in the *rath*. Importantly, none of these objects is considered the center of the *rath* or its essential, indispensable core. As mentioned above, unlike elsewhere in India, a palanquin in the Kullu Valley does not bear a *murti* but, once fully constructed, itself becomes one. Even the metal faces affixed to the chair, which grant the *rath* its anthropomorphic features, do not occupy this position. In some palanquins one of the *mohras* may be considered of special importance, often due to its relative antiquity, but even in these cases the metal face is not considered the sole locus of the divine presence. Thus, for example, whereas many of Hadimba's devotees often identify her with one particular metal face located at the front of her palanquin—that of a young female with sharp features and a big, round nose ring—they insist that most of the other metal faces also represent the goddess, including those adorned with unmistakably masculine mustaches. In any case,

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Berti 2009; Sax 2003: 189-190.

none of these faces function as a *murti* in the usual sense of the word, that is, as an object kept in a temple for regular display and worship; when not affixed to the *rath*, the *mohras* are sealed in a special box stored in the *madhar* (treasury house).<sup>16</sup> In fact, seeing the palanquins decorated with a host of such anthropomorphic metal faces, one is literally faced with the multifaceted nature of divinity in Kullu.

An essential multiplicity thus lies at the heart of the material manifestation of the deity in the *rath*. According to Berti, “the divine presence [in the Kullu *raths*] does not seem to be concentrated in a unique object ... but is delocalized and distributed throughout the various components ... the deity’s power is present in the whole assemblage of the representation” (2004: 87). As we will see, the divine presence extends even further and exceeds the physical boundaries of the *rath*, encompassing the palanquin’s associated paraphernalia, such as the staff (*chadi*), yak-tail flywhisk (*caunr*), peacock-feather fan (*mor-muttha*), donation box (*patar*), and accompanying musical instruments. It even pervades elements of the environment and the people who attend to it. In other words, a fundamental notion in the Kullu valley, embodied in, expressed through, and revealed by the *rath* institution, is that divinity is, by its very nature, distributed. This, we may recall, is very similar to the conceptualization of complex agency offered above. Let us see how this happens.

### ***Cohesive Collaboration***

A significant number of community members are involved in the maintenance and assemblage of the components constituting Hadimba’s *rath*, as well as in operating the latter once it is constructed. An

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<sup>16</sup> Whether such absence of central *murti* characterizes all palanquins in the Western Himalayas is not entirely clear. When referring to roof-type (*chatvala*) palanquins of Mahasus, for example, Sutherland seems to suggest that they do contain such a focal image: “When out of his temple, the image of the deity is kept hidden from public view inside the box-shaped body of the palanquin. A curtain (*purdah*) is used to conceal the image as it is transferred to the palanquin. Mahasus are characteristically depicted in full-body images” (Sutherland 1998: 101). However, a few pages later, Sutherland writes, “Unlike the Mahasus, the images (P. mohra: face) of jhangrus are visible” (Sutherland 1998: 104). The fact that he now equates “images” with *mohras* complicates his earlier observation, since now it is not clear whether the Mahasus’ images function as temple *murtis* or as *mohras* whose status as *murtis* is more problematic. Other writers, too, are not always clear about this issue.

especially conspicuous example of such a collaborative endeavor took place from 1988 to 1990, when a new palanquin of Hadimba and Manu was produced. The previous *rath*, which according to devotees was several hundred years old, had fallen into decay and was no longer reliable. Production of the new palanquin required intense community involvement, heavy financing, and meticulous, collective ritual measures ensuring the purity of the procedure.<sup>17</sup> Thus, many villagers were involved in choosing, felling, transporting, and processing four walnut trees for the woodwork; each step was accompanied by numerous pujas that required the participation of many in the community; and dozens of animals were offered in collectively financed sacrifices. Several rituals, especially the concluding one during which the new palanquin was “charged” with divine powers, required the approval of both Hadimba and the yoginis of the surrounding forests in oracular consultation, thus making them part of the collective ritual as well.

Whereas construction of the *rath*'s wooden chair is quite a rare occasion, production of the other constituents of the *rath* is more frequent and involves similar collective efforts. The silver and gold insignia attached to the chair—the umbrellas and the silver cones that support them, the diadem, the metal covers of the carrying poles, as well as the metal faces—are occasionally damaged and need repair. The whole community funds the process of the renewal and consecration of these pieces by specialist artisans, and grants final approval of the outcome.<sup>18</sup> The most conspicuous ongoing act of collective participation in the material production of the palanquin is the regular contribution of cloth by devotees. They frequently give shiny, colorful pieces of fabric (*cadar*) to their gods by placing them on the palanquin as it moves through the village. The cloths are then collected by Hadimba's caretakers and kept in the *madhar* until, once every year or two, they are taken out and the best pieces are chosen to be integrated into the *rath*. The palanquin's old *cadar*-holder—a sort of arch made of dozens of

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<sup>17</sup> This ritual took place before my first arrival in Kullu Valley in 1994. The process is reported in some detail by Diserens, who witnessed parts of it firsthand and gathered information about the other stages from Rohit Ram, Hadimba's chief pujari.

<sup>18</sup> Hingorani (2013) documents the renovation of *mohras* and other palanquin-related objects. She nicely describes one incident in which a village crowd gathers and collectively evaluates the artistic quality of a recently made silver belt that encircles a four-sided *rath*.

cloths that is affixed to the back of the chair and which gives the *rath* its strikingly colorful appearance—is taken apart, and the old *cadars* are replaced with new ones. All community members participate in this continual process of renewal.

The *madhar* (the *devta*'s treasury, where the offered *cadars* are kept) houses the *rath*'s other components as well.<sup>19</sup> Whereas one particular caretaker, the *madhari*, is in charge of securing their safety, all community members share responsibility for their wellbeing. The structure is often located in the middle of the village, and strangers who approach it are bound to draw attention and to be questioned by villagers about their intentions. I could feel this sort of shared village surveillance myself, while visiting numerous villages in Himachal Pradesh in search of additional Hadimba temples in 2015, and asking locals about the sorts of ritual objects their goddesses possessed in an attempt to uncover possible associations with Hadimba. My journey took place exactly one year after a high-profile event in the region, during which the *murti* of a famous local god was stolen but fortunately recovered after intense police work.<sup>20</sup> Even though treasure-hunting and antique-mongering is quite common in the region, this recent theft left an exceptional impression on the people of the area. It soon became clear that my own inquiries about the sacred *nishan* (insignia) kept in the *madhars* were more than a little unwelcome. Almost without exception, villagers who were welcoming and helpful at first turned distant and uncooperative when I began asking questions about the divine insignia in the treasure houses. It was obvious that villagers felt responsible for these objects, which they regarded as collective possessions that needed to be guarded by all.

The *rath* is not only collectively produced and guarded but is assembled collectively as well. Since it is taken apart at the end of every festive occasion (*rath mandharna*) and its components are taken to the *madhar*, it needs to be reassembled every time from scratch. The assembly process begins with the caretakers bringing the boxes containing the metal faces, silver and gold decorations, and jewelry to the temple, where the wooden chair is placed on a carpet and the

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<sup>19</sup> In Hadimba's and Manu's case the wooden chair is the only component that is not kept in the *madhar* but in Manu's temple.

<sup>20</sup> The *murti* was that of Raghunath Ji, the presiding deity of the Kullu Valley.

construction process begins in the presence of the priests and oracles. As time proceeds, more and more people arrive, including community elders, musicians, and other functionaries. Once the *rath* is built, dozens of people gather in the temple, contributing to the process by bringing objects, assembling them, playing music, or conducting rituals (details of which follow below). The palanquin is then lifted on devotees' shoulders and taken out to the temple yard, where a big crowd awaits, including women and children. In fact, these ritual moments, in which Hadimba and Manu are invited to inhabit their palanquin and make a public appearance, are much loved and well attended by devotees. If one is looking for an occasion in which the links between the community and its deities are most visible and constitutive, this is definitely a major one. Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of villagers gather around the *rath* as participants and onlookers when the *devtas* become present. Then, amidst the smell of incense, the thunder of the drums, the blaring of the horns, and the press of the crowd, the palanquin begins to sway, first lightly and sporadically, then regularly and in ever expanding arcs. Often it begins to spiral around as if out of control. It becomes "alive" as the god or goddess's *shakti* or power enters it. Observing such ritual moments myself on many occasions, I was often led to a very Durkheimian interpretation. The community, coming together in a highly charged ritual moment, gathering around its *devta* as it comes alive, is no doubt celebrating here something of its own self.

In some areas, lower-caste people are not allowed to carry the palanquin, but in the case of Hadimba all males may do so. As the palanquin leaves the temple and begins touring the village, dozens of volunteers from the crowd continually transfer it to their own shoulders, thus contributing to the shared effort of carrying it. Thus, Hadimba, the village goddess, is literally carried on the community's shoulders in her palanquin and is constantly surrounded by hundreds of devotees. Watching the group from above, as many villagers do while sitting on high fences and second-floor verandas, one sees the palanquin as the focal point of a large group of people moving along together.

Unsurprisingly, the cohesion of this procession is highly valued and considered necessary. This becomes especially clear when this ideal is somewhat relaxed. Seeing gaps developing between the participants during a certain procession, one of the elderly musicians complained

that people nowadays no longer march *ek sath* (together, as a group) as they should. Instead, he said, they scatter and walk separately (*ek ek karke*). On another occasion, when the *rath* was processing to the Dasahara festival, another elderly man had similar complaints. The carriers, he said, should not go separately as they do but stick together. They carry with them the silver and golden insignia, he explained, as well as jewelry and other valuable objects. They should therefore walk together as a group so these objects can remain safe. An ongoing and rather vivid display of the need to stick together occurs later in this festival, which is held in a big ground in the capital of the valley. There, thousands of devotees carry the palanquins of their gods alongside the wheeled chariot of Raghunath Ji (Lord Rama), the chief deity of the valley, whose march to the battlefield of the Ramayana is ritually staged during the first day of the event. Advancing with the palanquins through a highly dense crowd for almost a mile, the groups are constantly running against each other and every individual is in constant danger of becoming separated from his group. Here, the many participants hold each other's arms, pull one another when dragged behind, and make the utmost effort to stick together. The mutual dependency of the *devta* and his devotees becomes vividly apparent. The palanquin provides the group's focal point around which to gather, thereby keeping the collective from falling apart. At the same time the devotees' adherence to one another and their ability to stick together are what enables and safeguards the palanquin's integrity and the deities' very existence in this public, inter-communal display.

### ***Division of Ritual Labor***

So far we have seen how the material production, maintenance, assembly and ritual treatment of Hadimba's *rath* are part of a collective, solidary, and even egalitarian effort. Thus the *devi* is constituted as a representative of the community, which functions as a united, homogenous body. However, as already mentioned, public rituals maintain social divisions and hierarchies no less than they create communal solidarity and unity. The same is true for the *rath* rituals, during which social divisions are displayed and thereby simultaneously maintained and reproduced. As a result, the *devi* in the *rath* is

constituted as an emblem of a whole that is fragmented and stratified no less than it is unified and egalitarian.<sup>21</sup>

Take, for example, the *devtas'* *saman* (luggage). As mentioned above, the metal faces, jewelry, decorative cloths, the *devta's* staff and several of its accompanying musical instruments are all kept in the *madhar*, the treasury house located in the middle of the village. Kamal, Hadimba's present *madhari*—the person in charge of guarding the luggage—worships these objects daily, and sleeps in the treasure house every night to guard them against theft. He accompanies the *rath* wherever it goes and always stays near it to keep an eye on the materials that travel with it. This duty, which he now shares with his cousin's son, has run in his family for three generations, ever since it was handed over to his grandfather from the previous *madhari*, who was childless and the last of his lineage. Interestingly, Kamal is not in charge of carrying the *devta's* accessories from the *madhar* to the temple, where the *rath* is built. This duty is assigned to Hadimba's *kamdars*, her caretakers, who are not of any particular family but appointed to the job for several years and later replaced by others. This important and highly visible position is granted only to high-caste people (locally called "Thakurs"), thereby entrenching their caste's privileged status in managing the *devi's* affairs.

Once all the paraphernalia is in place, the wooden chair is examined and, if necessary, strengthened and fixed by one of three brothers, who are Hadimba's carpenters. The latter are of the Thavai caste, whose status is only slightly lower than that of the Thakurs. Their duty is to maintain the wooden structure of Hadimba's temple, fix and rebuilt her *rath* if necessary, and carry a *mor-muttha* (peacock-feather fan) during palanquin processions. Their lineage, too, is distinguished by this duty. Once the chair is ready, it is placed on a special carpet, and a small basket filled with freshly picked flowers is placed in front of it. Providing the flowers is the duty of the *mali*, Hadimba's gardener, a

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<sup>21</sup> This role of *devtas* in upholding social cohesion concomitantly with inner divisions is observed by other scholars as well. Surinder Jodhka puts it rather succinctly: "Devatas have traditionally played an active role in social control and keeping the community together. Everyone comes together in the local temple and their roles in the temple reinforce the structure of traditional social hierarchy" (Jodhka 2015: 64).



function currently performed by seven members of a single Harijan<sup>22</sup> family from Dhungri, who rotate the job on a yearly basis.

Once the flowers are present, the task of decorating begins. Performing this central duty is the sole privilege of the *dhaunsi*, Hadimba's chief drummer, or his direct kin, and of either Hadimba's or Manu's oracle. Meher Singh, the present-day *dhaunsi*, recounted a long story that explained the origin of his unique right. It went back to the days when Hadimba, who at that point had no palanquin, ordered the king of Kullu to build one for her. After a number of human opponents to the *devi*'s request were found dead, everyone else grew fearful of the goddess's wrath. No one dared to approach the wooden trunk brought especially for the task of building the *rath*. It was then decided that only the *dhaunsi* and Hadimba's *gur* (oracle) could safely complete this work. For many generations since, the task of decoration has fallen to Meher Singh's *khandan* (lineage) and to the incumbent oracles. Since the *gur* is selected by the gods themselves, and his position does not necessarily run in his family (though it usually does), his kin cannot perform this duty in his stead, and he is the only one who can "lay his hand on the *rath*." Whereas Meher Singh is sometimes replaced by his son, the oracle's family members are forbidden from taking his place in this regard.<sup>23</sup>

Once the *rath* is assembled, Hadimba's *pujaris* take over. One of them—the duty rotates between the three elder brothers and their families on a ten-day basis—cleans the *mohras* and marks *tikas* on their foreheads and on other parts of the *rath*, such as the attached silver umbrellas, the cones holding them, and the diadem. The *pujari* then decorates the *rath* with the flowers brought by the *mali* and prepares the bell and censer (*ghanti dhaudch*), which he will carry during the procession. Now that the *rath* is ready for worship, all the other duty holders gather around it. The *kardar*, or one of his family members, lifts the *devta*'s *chadi* (staff), and the *thavais* hold the *mor-muttha* and the *caunr* (yak-tail flywhisk). The *saduk*, the silver money box, is held by one

<sup>22</sup> This term is still the most common in the region in referring to low-caste people in a respectful manner. I therefore follow this terminology here.

<sup>23</sup> This, at least, is the theory as it was explained to me by Meher Singh, whom I quote in this paragraph. In reality, I witnessed occasions when relatives of Manu's oracle replaced him in assembling the *rath*.

of a number of high-caste village members who take turns on the job. The musicians also take their place, and like the others in the yard, occupy fixed spatial positions. The *dhaunsi* heads the group, with the *dhol* players of the *dholi* caste standing to his right and the *dhauns* players of the *lohar* (blacksmith) caste situated to his left. The *nagara* players, also of the *lohar* caste, though from a different family, stand next in line. At the back of the temple yard stand the players of wind instruments—the *kai* players of the Tsiyani and Phyar families, the *narkai* players of the Kui and Kors lineages, and the *narshinga* players of the Saraji *khandan*. As the *dhaunsi* gives the signal, they all start playing together, and the *pujari* begins to worship the *rath*. The latter is then lifted on devotees' shoulders, and another round of playing begins. The oracles then go into a trance and speak to the people. Once they are through, the palanquin procession begins.

Now the issue of who is allowed to carry the *rath* becomes crucial. As mentioned above, in many places in the region only high-caste people are allowed to do so. In such places, *rath* processions clearly mark caste hierarchies within the community, separating the upper, privileged castes from the lower, subaltern ones, who are excluded from participating in this important part of the ritual. In the case of Hadimba, however, whose temple is located near the village of Dhungri, and who is closely associated with its mostly Harijan residents, members of all castes are allowed to participate. Still, this does not mean that caste divisions are not displayed. When Hadimba is invited for private thanksgiving celebrations in village households, lower-caste people are prohibited from carrying the *rath* and are thus excluded and marked. On the other hand, when travelling to the annual Dasahara festival in the town of Kullu, only the people of Dhungri are allowed to carry, a duty they consider an honorable privilege. Thus, even when it comes to Hadimba, whose *rath*-carrying rules are rather relaxed in terms of caste, hierarchical divisions are not completely erased but are displayed several times a year.

Another important social distinction that is reproduced during the *rath* processions is that of gender. Whenever I asked Hadimba's male devotees who was allowed to carry her *rath*, they all insisted that "everyone can do it." No matter how much I pressed - "Is it allowed to all the people? Without exception? To absolutely everyone?" - the

answer was always in the affirmative. It was quite funny to witness the response of male devotees when I thereby concluded that women can carry the *rath*, as well. “Oh no,” was the response, “women are not allowed to do that, of course . . .” Yet, whereas women are indeed everywhere excluded from carrying the *devtas*’ palanquins, this does not mean that they do not have any ritual role during the *rath* procession. On the contrary, once the *rath* leaves the temple compound, it begins parading in the village, visiting along its way many of the community’s households, where it is worshiped by the women of the house. This duty is meticulously followed by dozens of the community’s married girls and elderly women alike, who circle their *thalis* in front of it, draw *tikas* on its *mohras*, throw rice at it, and lay cloths over it. This is the quintessential women’s ritual role.

Another conspicuously gendered practice associated with the moving *rath* is that of stepping underneath it for good luck (*shubh labh*). As the palanquin advances through the village, and during its journey to its destination, women, often with young babies in their laps and accompanied by small children, signal to the palanquin carriers to stop, and then bend their backs and move right underneath it. Once they emerge from beneath the decorated *rath*, the *pujari* hands them a few flowers, which they place on their and their children’s heads. This custom, which is much loved among the women and often accompanied by laughter and giggling for the slight physical effort it involves, is considered a good occasion for getting the auspicious blessing of the *devta*. Whereas men may sometime perform this ritual as well, it is reserved almost exclusively for women and their children. Thus, whereas men are in charge of lifting the goddess and transporting her, women participate in worshipping her and getting her blessing by bowing their heads and passing underneath her. The procession thus becomes an arena for both genders to display their different social positions by performing distinct ritual roles.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> However interesting, a detailed analysis of how the gendered ritual roles associated with the *rath* correspond to more general gendered divisions in the region is beyond the scope of this paper. That being said, we should note that it is quite obvious that the most fundamental gendered division displayed and constructed in this context is that between the private, familial sphere and that of the outside, public world. The women—who are usually referred to in these regions as *gharvalis*, or “housewives”—are indeed confirmed by these practices as wives and mothers, intimately associated with home and family. The

As we can see, all the village's castes and many of its particular families have assigned roles in the *rath* rituals. Their presence is compulsory, and their contribution to the formation of the goddess in her palanquin is essential. Women and children also have their roles, and their presence as a distinct social group is similarly indispensable. Thus, the rituals associated with the *rath* function as a key arena where social divisions are marked, publicly displayed, and thereby reproduced. Concomitantly, the goddess, who is ritually produced in the process of assembling, carrying, and accompanying the *rath*, is constituted as a multi-level compound, whose internal composition is as divided and hierarchical as that of the community that constructs and carries her through space and time.

## (2) Substantive transactions

In his writing about complex agency, Inden does not explicitly mention the concept of "dividual." However, as Peter van der Veer rightly points out in reviewing Inden's above-discussed book, it is clear that this notion heavily informs his thoughts. In the 1970s, Inden and McKim Marriott, his colleague at Chicago University, developed what they called "ethnology," which called for the study of Indian society through its own conceptual categories rather than through Western ones. Central to their work is the study of the caste system, which in their analysis conceptually relies on a comprehensive economy of exchanges of coded substances (Marriott and Inden 1977). In the United States, they argue, in the context of kinship relations, nature and law are perceived as two separate realms, but in India the two categories merge.<sup>25</sup> Each social group, and every genus (*jati*) of beings more

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men, on the other hand, are affirmed as those who occupy the public sphere and move both in and beyond the village. Whereas this gendered difference is rather relaxed in the mountains, as compared to other places in India, it nevertheless exists here as well.

<sup>25</sup> Inden and Marriott draw in their article on David Schneider's famous study of the terms and symbols with which modern Americans think and talk about kinship (Schneider 1968). As the two scholars explain, "Schneider finds that all kinds of Americans understand their varied kinship ties as consisting ultimately of pairs of things. One constituent they conceive of as 'nature,' that is, linkages through natural acts, especially love or sexual intercourse. The other constituent, something that Americans often think of as transcending nature, is 'law'—codes for the conduct of persons who have made linkages with each other" (Marriott and Inden: 227). In contrast, South Asians, Inden and observe, "do not insist on drawing a line between what Westerners call 'natural' and what they call

broadly—be it human castes, animal species, or divine creatures—is characterized by its own, unique code that pervades the substance of which its members are made. This is the group's substance-code, its dharma, its ideal essence. Significantly, each particular member of the genus is in constant interaction and exchange with its surroundings—through birth, ingestion of food, sexual intercourse, disposal of hair and sweat, excretion, services accepted and provided, etc.—thereby receiving and emitting substance-codes. Each of these numerous transactions, in which the substance-codes flow in and out of persons, transforms the composition of both givers and takers, thereby altering their inner qualities and relative ranks (Ibid: 232-3; Marriott 1976: 114).

The intricate mechanics of this process do not concern us here. What is of interest to us are the implications the authors draw from all this with respect to the notion of the self. The constant transactional relationships in which all people are embedded, the ongoing series of exchanges that mold their material composition and inner qualities, reveal a perception of self that, unlike that in the West, is not an *individual*—a discrete, bounded, and self-contained entity—but rather a *dividual*—a porous being that is in constant exchange with other beings around it and whose internal essence is determined by what is absorbed from and transmitted to them. The close similarity of Inden's and Marriot's dividual to a complex agent should now become clear. Both conceptualizations point to beings that are not homogenous, isolated, and stable, but rather composite, porous, and changing. They are produced and molded through their constant exchanges with other entities around them. They flow into one another and shape each other as they do so. This is exactly what happens in a series of ritual exchanges that transpire between the community members and Hadimba when she is manifested in her palanquin. These mutual material exchanges, I argue, contribute to creating the goddess as an embodied assemblage of the shared substance-codes of her devotees, a compound of their different selves.<sup>26</sup>

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'moral' ... the code for conduct of living persons is not regarded as transcendent over bodily substance" (Marriott and Inden: 228).

<sup>26</sup> Whereas Marriot's and Inden's project was later criticized, mainly for being ahistoric and for "othering" Indians, later important studies did embrace its main insight. Lawrence Babb (1981) uses the notion of visual interaction to explain the logic underlying the exchange between deity and devotee during darsan; Ann Grodzins Gold interprets

We have already discussed the popular practice of contributing cloths (*cadar*) to the moving palanquin. It should now be mentioned that these pieces of cloth are invested with all sorts of personal meaning. Some devotees endow them with hope and request a desired goal, others with gratitude for a wish fulfilled, yet others with obligation and general propriety. In all cases, Hadimba in her *rath* is colored with the hopes, thanksgivings, and commitments of her devotees. She thus becomes the locus of communal sentiments, a shining embodiment of assembled, communal feelings. Other sorts of substances that flow from the community to the goddess seem to produce a similar effect. Flowers, for example, are also a common offering, and they soon cover the *rath* as it marches through the village. The flowers, which vary in color, size, and smell, are hand-picked by devotees in advance and are highly appreciated. In fact, devotees insist that flowers are the only thing the *devtas* really want from their followers, so that offerings to the goddess become a display of practitioners' commitment to their goddess and an embodiment of the feelings of true devotion towards her.

Less valued, according to this view, but still highly popular, is the flow of money. Interestingly, whereas one can give money to the *pujari*, oracle, or carrier of the donation box, who all walk next to the *rath*, most people prefer putting the currency notes on the palanquin itself, even though they are immediately collected by one of these functionaries. This insistence on an unmediated flow of the monetary substance from the devotee to the deity reveals the practitioners' desire for direct contact with her and for an unimpeded exchange between them and the goddess. The palanquin is thus constantly touched by devotees and covered with their gifts—in other words, continuously reproduced in an ongoing process of communal substance exchange.

As the *rath* proceeds through the village, another sort of public inflow of substances takes place. The palanquin halts in front of a number of key places, where the women of the surrounding households

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pilgrimage from an indigenous, rural point of view as a mechanism for the material expulsion of death out of the village and the introduction of life in its stead (1988); Valentine Daniel shows how the notions of dividuality and the sharing of similar substances between people of the same *jati* not only characterizes social thought and life in Tamil Nadu but also shapes theories of knowledge, which are embedded in the practice of pilgrimage (1984: Ch.7); and Sax, as I discuss in the coming pages, theorizes the concept of dividual further to include transactions with the environment (1991, 2009).

are waiting to worship it. Dressed in their finest traditional *pautu* (ceremonial woolen blanket worn by women in this mountainous region), the women worship the *rath* with the metal *thalis* in their hands, in which flowers, rice, metal coins, and other materials have been placed. They then mark colorful powder *tikas* on each of the *rath's* metal faces and decorative umbrellas and place flowers, rice, and *cadars* over it. Importantly, unlike the contributions I describe above, which are performed voluntarily by individuals, these ritual offerings are made in the name of village households and are obligatory, predetermined, and orchestrated. The substantive contact between household representatives and Hadimba's palanquin is a regular part of her communal construction.

Significantly, the flow of substances is not unilateral. The goddess embodied in the *rath* does not only absorb but disperses substances as well. Most common are the *shesh* (remainders)—flowers that are returned to the devotees from the *rath* and placed either on their heads and hair or, preferably, in their *topi*, the popular Kullu cap that has a special pocket built into it dedicated exactly for this purpose. Another common outflowing substance is a small piece of cinder or ash that is taken out of the *devta's* censer (*dhaudch*) and placed in smaller, ladle-like censers held by the worshipping women. These are then taken inside the house and placed in front of the shrine of the *kul devta* (family deity). Thus, just as with the inflowing substances, the outflowing ones are also distributed on both individual and household levels. With the advent of technology in rural India in recent years, a new form of transaction has developed. It is now fairly popular among devotees to snap photos of the moving palanquin with their mobile phones, which are widely available. In a logic that seems to be closely associated with that of *darsan*—where seeing the god and being seen by him amount to an auspicious substantive contact between the two (Babb 1981; Eck 1998)—devotees thus capture and retain something of the visual flow emanating from their goddess.

This constant exchange and flow of substances between community members and Hadimba in her palanquin produces the goddess as the focal point of the group, a dividual whose inner composition is shaped by the inflows from her community. At the same time, substances flow from her to them, binding them ever closer together, while

concomitantly reproducing hierarchies and gender divisions within the group. Hadimba is thus revealed as a complex being made of charged materials that ritually circulate between her and the group of people who worship her.

This circulation of substances is not limited to the social sphere alone. As Sax has repeatedly shown, the Pahari dividual is in constant substantive interchange not only with other humans but with the surroundings, or environment, as well:

Conventional scholarship, following the dominant Euro-American world view, treats the loci of residence (houses, towns, states, nations, etc.) as geographically bounded entities with definite borders. Residence in these units is defined in external terms of location and/or legal definition, and the “individual” is not substantially affected by where he or she resides. Many South Asians, by contrast, think of their places of residence as biophysical entities. According to this more holistic way of conceiving of the world, people and the places where they reside are engaged in a continuing set of exchanges; they have determinate, mutual effects upon each other because they are part of a single, interactive system (1991: 72).

[T]he biological, social, and moral relationships in a house or a village are not only among the people who live there but between them and the place, house, or village itself; all are parts of complex, biomoral wholes; all are related through place (ibid: 125).

While Sax refers here to the relations existing between places and the human dividuals residing in them, his observations, I argue, are true for *devtas* as well. The materials offered to the deities reveal that their dividuality is perceived as shaped by an exchange with their surrounding environment as well, as substances from it constantly flow to their palanquin, thereby affecting their inner state. Thus, the many flowers offered to the *rath* by the household women, or the fennel leaves that are a common offering in their *thalis*, are often plucked from household gardens, which many in the village cultivate. Other substances given by the women come from the village’s fields, with rice



being clearly playing a central role. On special occasions, people also greet the goddess by throwing a young lamb from the family's livestock over her *rath* and offering it to her in sacrifice. The forest is also a source for the circulating ritual substances, such as the powder used for *tikas* drawn on the *rath's* metal faces. This powder, locally known as *kungu* (Hindi: *kumkum*), is produced from the yellow pollen of the area's widespread *devdar* (cedar) trees. As we have seen above, other forest trees (walnuts) are the very substance of which the palanquin's chair is made. The mountain juniper (*bethar*), too, which is burned in the *devta's* censer and whose unique smell engulfs the *rath* as it proceeds through the village, is harvested higher in the mountains during a long journey conducted from time to time by Hadimba's priests.

A particularly interesting example of the importance of the environment to the palanquin's material composition is the *mohras*. Many of the latter are made of metals that were traditionally mined in the area itself, which is rich with silver, copper and lead.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, many of the faces are reputed to have emerged spontaneously out of the ground. A book by a local writer named Sudarshan Vashishtha, which documents and provides essential information on as many as 140 *devtas* in Kullu, with a special focus on their palanquins, relates several such emergence stories. One story, for example, tells of a certain villager who was chopping down a tree when he suddenly heard a voice asking him to stop. He nevertheless continued striking and, upon the second strike, he suddenly found a metal face inside it. He took it home, made some inquiries, and eventually "realized that the *mohrā* was of Vyas Rishi. From that time Vyas Rishi began to be worshiped in this village [Kunir]" (Vashishtha 1996: 119). This and the other material transactions in which the palanquins are involved reveal that the *devtas* are an integral part, in fact the focal points, of the biophysical and biomoral wholes in which they are embedded.

### (3) Integrative legitimation

The final stage of establishing the *devtas* as complex agents is their integration into the regional religious fold. If every village deity is

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the report given by the British traveler and mineral expert Calvert on the subject (Calvert 1873).

indeed a “form” in a regional “scale of forms,” then it needs to be put in contact with other such “forms” in order to become fully integrated. In other words, the constitution of Hadimba as a complex agent who is legitimized as the sovereign queen of her particular community of followers involves her integration within the socioreligious network of the surrounding communities and their respective ruler gods. Here, too, the palanquin plays a central role. It is in fact the major vehicle for such integration, which is performed at regional festivals when the *raths* of the deities crisscross the region and interact with each other in a variety of choreographed ritual patterns. Sutherland discerns three general settings in which such interactions occur, namely (1) *circumambulation*, during which a chief *devta* travels through his territory and interacting on his way with subordinate village gods; (2) *exchange*, when two village deities alternately visit each other periodically; and (3) *centering*, when several deities gather in the region’s capital and interact with the area’s royal *devta* in a way that displays their subordination. Whereas Sutherland describes the broad settings of these interactions, I concentrate here on the minute details of the actual ritual encounters between the travelling *raths*.

Such ritual *rath* encounters (*milan*) comprise several choreographed moves. The *devtas* “greet” one another as their palanquins, situated side by side while facing opposite directions, lean towards each other. They “converse” by having their *raths* face each other and then lean sideways in opposite directions, bringing their front poles closer until they almost touch each other. The *devtas* often express joy through their palanquins, as they sway rapidly from side to side, their jewelry rattling and the cloths covering them fluttering. Or they simply dance together, as when the *raths* are held upright while their carriers pace from right to left and back again. Occasionally the *raths* also race each other, as happens during the Thoda festival, when Takshak Nag competes with his younger brother Phal Nag (Berti 2001: Chapter 10). Alternatively, the *raths* march together in a group, keeping their fixed respective locations vis-à-vis one another, as during the annual Dasahara festival. In quieter moments the palanquins simply “sit” next to one another, placed on special carpets as their devotees worship all of them together and ask for their blessings. When a visiting *devta* stays for more than one day, which is not at all unusual, the *raths* spend the night together in the

temple of the hosting *devta*, situated intimately one next to another. As the visiting *devta* leaves, the host deity's *rath* accompanies the departing palanquin for a short while before returning to the festival ground.<sup>28</sup>

During special occasions, when a great number of *devtas* head to the same festive event, there are even rules of conduct that dictate the proper ritual behavior along the way. The rule of thumb is that, if two *raths* happen upon each other unexpectedly outside the ritual arena, they do not stop to greet each other but simply move on.<sup>29</sup> This rule, however, is sometimes broken when the two *devtas* share an especially close connection. Thus, for example, in the 2015 Dasahara festival, as Hadimba was moving through the narrow lanes of the town of Kullu on her way to the central festival ground, she suddenly met her son, Ghatotkaca, who had just arrived from his temple in Banjar valley and was advancing in the opposite direction.<sup>30</sup> The two palanquins stopped, greeted each other, and ritually conversed for a short while in the midst of dozens of curious onlookers. Case-specific ritual choreographies also exist. Thus, when Hadimba crosses Shuru village on her way to a triannual meeting with five other *devtas* in the village of Banara, she performs a unique ritual dance in front of the temple of the local goddess Shabri. On other festive occasions, when both Hadimba and a *devta* named Shank Narayan are present, the two always sit side by side. During the Dasahara festival, Hadimba is always visited by the above-mentioned Ghatotkaca from Banjar. His *rath* is placed next to hers, and the two deities spend a few hours together in her tent.

Such interactive encounters integrate the *devtas* into the regional socioreligious fold. They become part of a network of deities who engage with each other according to a common protocol. Central to our concern here is the fact that such encounters also contribute to the production of each *devta* as a distinct persona whose observable, unique

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<sup>28</sup> This is how practitioners explained the meanings of this coded language, which is quite intuitive.

<sup>29</sup> When questioned regarding the reason for this custom, devotees either states that "that's simply how it is" (*aisa hai*) or reason that it is meant to prevent disorder on the ritual ground. It seems to me that the ritual awkwardness in such unpredicted encounters, which lack the proper ceremonial context for the occasion, propels the logic underlying this rule.

<sup>30</sup> Ghatotkaca, who according to the Mahabharata is Hadimba's son, is worshipped in several places in H.P.

identity is closely intertwined with that of his community. Several of the palanquins, for example, have distinct behavioral patterns that are considered their distinguishing feature. Hadimba is known for her composure, and her *rath* often remains “cool” and relatively steady, even when other gods are swinging, running, or ecstatically spiraling. Dhumal Nag, on the contrary, a *devta* considered the “policeman of the gods,” is restless, continuously running around the ritual arena while paying little attention to whatever or whoever is in his way. His *rath*’s carriers are always out of breath, not to say defeated by this erratic choreography, and the whole group stands out in every festive encounter. These sorts of *rath* movements, which are said to be controlled by the *devta* himself and not by the carriers of the palanquin, are a key arena where the agency of the god most vividly manifests.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, however, what primarily separates the *raths* from one another are their aesthetic features. Here is how a young boy from Dhungri described the variety of palanquins I would encounter in the Dasahara:

You’ll be shocked. There are so many gods there. There are those with long hair, from behind, and those with four poles, which move in four directions. And there are gods from Saraj with high umbrellas, which cost thousands of rupees, hundreds of thousand, made of gold. And there are even raths that have mohras on their backs. You’ll be shocked. There are krores [tens of millions] of gods there. The whole ground is packed with gods.

As this description attests, each of the area’s sub-regions has its own unique style of palanquin. Berti mentions several distinguishing stylistic markers in Kullu, such as the shape of the frame (one- or four-sided), length and elasticity of the poles, method of tying the cloths, and the presence or absence of decorative “hair”—black yak-tail hair that is attached to the palanquin in several possible ways (2004: 100-3). Of a completely different style is the *kardu*, a smaller ritual vehicle that is carried on the head of a single person. Sutherland, too, describes

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<sup>31</sup> I plan to look into the expressive manifestations of the *devtas*’ agency in a future publication. As stated above, in this article I am more interested in the ritual basis for the production of this agency rather than in the instances of its autonomous manifestations.

distinct palanquin styles in Bashahr, each implying associations with the identity of the *devta* that manifests in it, the region in which it is worshiped, and the caste of its followers. Some important styles are the “roof type” palanquins (also known as “box type”), the “longhair type,” and the “chair type.” A fourth type, which like the *kardu* in Kullu is carried by only one person, is that of the *kalash*—the water-pot or urn (1998: 99). In Garhwal additional styles can be found, such as a *doli* style palanquin, consisting “of a hollow wooden frame in the shape of a cube ... [that is] tightly wrapped in red cloth, [and] is borne on two poles about 4m long” (Taylor 2011: 205). An especially tall vehicle, reported by Sax, belongs to a *devta* named Ghandyal, who travels in the shape of a six-meter-long bamboo staff with a yak-tail whisk and flower garland suspended from a cross piece near its top, and “a small golden parasol, with a red-and-white cloth banner perhaps nine meters long trailing out behind.” The structure looks “like a bearded giant with a flowing cape” (2003: 181).

The distinctiveness of the sub-regional styles does not mean that all the *raths* in a certain area are identical. A closer inspection of the palanquins in the Kullu Valley reveals differences on a number of levels: there are variations in the shape and size of the wooden chairs (Bijli Mahadev, for example, is known for his exceptionally sizeable and heavy *rath*); in the shape and number of the ornamental elements attached to the palanquin (diadem, umbrellas, umbrella holders, peacock feathers, etc.); in the sorts of jewelry decorating it; and, of course, in the number, arrangement, and special features of the *mohras*. At times, the identifying markers of the travelling *devta* may even exceed the boundaries of the *rath*. The insignia (*nishan*) or other objects carried by the caretakers around the *rath* may stand out, such as Hadimba’s two big cymbals that are uncommon in the area compared with the popular smaller single cymbal (*thali*); or the signs of *Jamlu Devta* (Jamadagani Rishi), who has no palanquin but instead travels in the form of spears (*barcha*) and royal fans (*suraj pankha*).

Crucial to our concern here—an aspect that I myself experienced during my work in the field—is that what mostly separates each *devta* from his fellow deities and makes him easily identifiable is the particular devotees who carry and accompany him on his way. During my first months in the field I kept asking people about the identity of

the *devtas* we encountered during festivals and other ritual occasions. It was not at all unusual for my interlocutors to quickly identify the particular *devta*, but to be much slower in pointing out the unique features of the *rath* on which they based their observations. Later, as I became more familiar with both the gods and the people of the area, it dawned on me that it was much easier to identify the people accompanying the *devta* than to identify the *rath* itself. This was especially true with regard to the main caretakers, such as the *devta's gur, pujari*, and chief musicians, who almost always accompany the *devta* in his palanquin. My informants confirmed that this method was indeed efficient and described how they themselves often recognize the *devta* by the familiar faces of his *deuli* (accompanying caretakers). This close association between the *devta*, his *rath*, and his community highlights how intimately their identities intertwine.

### Conclusion

The centrality of the *rath* rituals to the constitution of the Indian Himalayan *devtas* as complex agents should now be clear. During these rituals the *devtas* could be said to be produced both *by* and *of* their people. Hadimba, who serves here as our prime example, is collectively produced, guarded, assembled, and transported *by* all members of her community. They participate in her rituals both as a unified and coherent group and as a hierarchical and divided one. In addition, regular exchanges of substance take place between Hadimba, members of her community, and the physical environment in which they are all embedded. She is thus produced as a dividual being whose material essence and internal composition are also made *of* her devotees and the biomoral and biophysical surroundings in which they live. These ritual practices all manifest the distributed nature of the goddess, who is revealed in her *rath* as the focal point of an assembled complex, a compounded entity that is in constant interaction and exchange with its dispersed parts. Fashioned this way, Hadimba is then integrated into a network of additional communities and gods through a series of choreographed ritual engagements. During these, her identity is constructed as unique and distinguishable and, at the same time as intimately intertwined with, and practically inseparable from, that of her followers. She thus becomes her people's emblem, their divine

representative, a manifestation of their complex agency.

This sheds a new light on the episode with which we opened our discussion. A Goshali villager, possessed, grabs Hadimba's *rath* as it about to leave the village and head back home. The *rath* halts, turns back, and all her community members return with her. This ignites a public discussion in which villagers, oracles, and *rath* all participate. Hadimba's followers are concerned by their prior commitment to a third community, which they are scheduled to meet the following day. Conflicting communal desires, expectations, considerations, and obligations are articulated. They are voiced by the *devtas*, performed by the *rath*, and discussed by the people. The *rath's* movements become the center of attention. Its unwillingness to proceed, along with the attempts to convince it to do so, drives the whole scene. An agreement is finally reached, which is pronounced by the oracle. Hadimba's *rath* signals that the solution is agreeable. It leaves the temple yard without turning back. The two communities use the ritual space that was thus opened to articulate their hitherto latent communal wish to strengthen their ritual and social ties. They devise a new course of action for their social interaction in the next year and thus effect a small change in their inter-communal relationship. Significantly, they do so while reading and responding to the movements of their respective *raths*, the material manifestations of their shared complex agency.

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## Music and cultural policy in Nepal: views from *lok dohori*

Anna Stirr

Nepal has only recently outlined a national cultural policy, although many policies throughout the years dealt with relationships between culture, state, and nation. Within these policies, the understanding of the concept of culture has developed along with changes in the structure of government and state, and changes in the meaning and usage of the term “culture” itself. In Nepal, the official emphasis on national integration and homogeneity has recently given way to more pluralist conceptions, as in many other nations (Vertovec 2010). Nepal’s current cultural policy has evolved from a unitary nationalist focus in state cultural policy in the Panchayat years (1960-1990), and a greater acknowledgement of cultural pluralism in the 1990s, to the current official commitments to form a more inclusive policy, which have been in place since 2006.

Nepal’s National Cultural Policy was formulated in 2010 and outlines many goals regarding cultural preservation and development, whilst emphasising inclusivity. The policy defines the Nepali national culture as the entirety of cultural expressions produced by the people of Nepal (GoN 2010: 1), and states that promoting unity in diversity is one of its goals (7.6). The policy’s tone promotes taking the ideas of what people think of as being culturally important into account when making policies. Yet despite this tone, and despite the country’s history of state patronage of cultural production, the current policy remains silent when it comes to the relationship between the state and the cultural industries. Here, I argue that even though it is not part of the official policy, the state would do well to pay attention to cultural industries when it is working toward the policy’s stated aims of cultural preservation, promotion, and development. In order to figure out how this might be done successfully, state organisations might start by listening to the concerns of professional folk cultural producers whose activities take place in both public and private sectors, who move between rural and urban spheres, and who express their own personal

investment into many of the same concerns that are expressed at the state policy level.

In this article I call attention to one field of cultural production in Nepal – professional folk music performance – in terms of its own internal multiplicities, and I help present the wishes of its members for various kinds of recognition from the state. I do this on the basis of more than a decade of ethnographic work with a group of performing artists whose professional lives cross the boundaries between public and private organisations, rural and urban lifeworlds, and commercial and noncommercial forms of performance, who express their personal investment in building a more inclusive society through their own contributions to national culture, yet who continue to struggle to make their voices heard at the level of national policy. I draw on ethnographic and survey data from professional performers of the musical genres of *lok dohori*, who work in Kathmandu *dohori* restaurants: a population at the nexus of changing state-promoted ideas of cultural nationalism, ethnic particularism, and debates about state support and commercialisation. This article is an attempt to present their concerns systematically, and to discuss how attention to their concerns may also be relevant beyond their particular musical field.

### **Defining culture as an object of policy**

Definitions of culture continue to be debated by anthropologists and policymakers the world over. The earlier anthropological concept of peoples and cultures that ascribed distinct cultures to bounded ethnic and regional groups has been roundly criticised by postcolonial scholars, who cite its lack of historical perspective (Fabian 1983), its tendency to reify difference at the expense of human commonalities, and its long-lasting political effects in the organisation of colonial ethnographic states and their postcolonial successors (Dirks 2001). While some perspectives now reject the culture concept altogether, others prefer to retain some of its senses, as ways to talk about shared values and traditions while remaining conscious that the groups that these values and traditions would appear to unite are constantly changing, and that their boundaries are not fixed.

Such is the position of the 2011 Nepal Constituent Assembly's concept paper on Culture (CA 2011: 53-54), informed by UNESCO (1982).

But, the concept of direct relations between distinct cultures and distinct societies persists in this concept paper, as expressed in sentences such as ‘a whole society’s way of life is symbolized within culture’ (UNESCO 1982: 54). Nepal’s 2010 National Cultural Policy has a more pluralistic bent, defining culture as belonging to groups conceived in different ways—religion, place, ethnic group, historical civilisations, asserting that they all together form national culture (GoN 2010: 1.1). In policy discussions, there remains tension between fixity and change, and between unitary and pluralist ways of imagining the nation. All of these are coloured by ongoing political debates centred on group identities (Joshi and Sada 2005, Diwas, Bandhu, and Nepal 2008: 5).

Scholars argue that to study the entire field of cultural policy, we must not only look at official state policies, but also at the policies embraced by civil society and corporate actors, both local and transnational (Ochoa 2003, Yúdice 2003, García Canclini 1995). This includes the culture industries—the locations where cultural work is paid work, and people make cultural products in commodity forms. Nepal’s 2010 National Cultural Policy does not address the culture industries. According to conversations with policymakers such as Ganesh Gurung, the author of the 2010 National Cultural Policy, one rationale behind this is that the state should embrace the promotion of cultural forms that the cultural industries may overlook and may even be eclipsing (personal communication, July 2011). Reflecting this aim, the 2010 National Cultural Policy includes an ambitious plan for surveying and documenting cultural practices throughout Nepal (GoN 2010: 9.25).

The cultural policies of other countries have historically ignored cultural industries, as policymakers focusing on cultural preservation have viewed cultural industries as an “‘other” against which cultural policy reacted’ (Hesmondalgh and Pratt 2005: 4). Yet over the past few decades many European and Latin American states have turned to focus on the cultural or creative industries in their national cultural policies (Hesmondalgh and Pratt 2005, Garnham 2005). Other states, such as India, long maintained state monopolies on the cultural industries, particularly the music industry (Manuel 1993). In recent history, Nepal had a short era of state cultural patronage in its Panchayat years, as discussed below. This era was instrumental in shaping the trajectory of

the cultural industries of Nepal as they would develop after state patronage scaled back in the 1980s and the newly democratic 1990s. In part, state-level choices heavily influenced what kinds of culture would be promoted as representing the nation. I discuss this below regarding folk music.

Thus, despite the focus of the National Cultural Policy on preserving the non-commercial, state policies have already had an effect on what gets promoted in the commercial sector, and along with this, what does not. Furthermore, as García Canclini (1995: 107) argues, mediated commodity forms play a huge role in contemporary life even in remote areas, and should no longer be considered as a sphere completely separate from another, idealised realm of traditional practice that is supposedly untainted by commerce. In other words, when studying cultural policy, we must pay attention to the intersections of state, commerce, and indeed other spheres as well.

State policy, idealised versions of tradition, and the commercial music industry intersect in the professional field of *lok dohori* song, which once enjoyed significant state support and still enjoys some, is rooted in multiple ongoing folk traditions, and is the highest grossing genre of popular music in Nepal. *Dohori* is a form of dialogic singing in which singers improvise rhyming couplets in a sung conversation, described in greater detail below. With its improvised, dialogic structure it is now often held up as a metaphor for positive interaction between different groups, such as people of different political persuasions (Stirr 2010). But behind celebrations of *dohori* as a vehicle for dialogue (Dixit 2002), is a controversial history of the genre that generates a perceived excess of cultural mixing. This is the history of *dohori* in various courtship practices that could (and often did) lead to elopements of couples that were intercaste, or otherwise deemed unsuitable to marry according to dominant social norms, fuelling conservative, purist fears of ethnic and caste mixture, and unsettling both ethnicising and nationalising narratives.<sup>1</sup> *Dohori*'s history of state support and its current status as a major genre of commercial popular music also challenge easy dichotomies between public and private, culture and commerce.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stirr 2009, Chapter 3.

### **Lok dohori: diverse traditions and commercial genre**

The term *lok git*, or folk song, has two referents in modern Nepali discourse: folk song of any type, and a broader commercial genre that includes many different song styles, united by their associations with rural life. *Lok dohori* is the term generally used to describe conversational duet songs within the professional field of commercial *lok git*. The term *dohori* is the Nepali word for the practice of singing songs in a dialogic or question-answer fashion, which is part of the traditions of many different ethnic, linguistic, and regional groups throughout Nepal (and many other parts of the world, including nearby northern India, southern China and Tibet, as well as many Southeast Asian, Mediterranean, and Latin American countries).<sup>2</sup> Another Nepali word for the practice of *dohori* singing is *juhari*, a term which is not used for the commercial genre. In Nepal, there are many terms for the particular practices of *dohori* singing, such as the northeastern genre of *hakpare*, the far-western genre of *deuda*, the genres of the Tarai region sung in Hindi and various other languages and summed up with the umbrella term *sawal-jawab gan*, and the Tibetan term *la-gzhas*. This is far from an exhaustive list, as the variety of terms is extensive. The practices of *dohori* singing are living traditions that are worthy of study and policy attention in their own right. They have received some scholarly attention<sup>3</sup> and will undoubtedly receive more as the proposed survey of cultural practices in Nepal moves forward. In this short article, I concentrate on the professionalised *lok dohori* field.

The commercialised, professionalised variety of *lok dohori* does not encompass all the kinds of *dohori* singing that exist in Nepal. Instead, it mainly consists of genres and styles from the central and western hill regions that are sung in the Nepali language. The prominence of these particular genres and styles stems from the process of state patronage, professionalization, and commercialisation that began with Radio Nepal in the 1950s, and continued with state-run competitions, private music

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of similar practices in Bolivia with an extensive bibliography on similar traditions worldwide, see Solomon 1994.

<sup>3</sup> For additional discussions of *dohori* (the practice of question-answer singing, in the broad sense, known by many other genre names) in various traditions and languages in Nepal, see Parajuli 2000, Shah 2006, Jones and Jones 1976 and March 2003, Ahearn 2001, Moiala 1989 and 1991, Acharya 2005, Pant 2006.

companies, and various public performance venues from the 1980s onward. The reason that these genres became emphasised over others is partly due to chance —the men in charge of the *lok git* department at Radio Nepal chose to promote *songs* from their home areas— partly because of the place of the central and western hills as the ancestral home of the Shah monarchy in existing nationalist history, and partly due to the relative wealth of these areas, their proximity to the capital, and the resulting ability to support a music industry. A closer look at the process by which genres from these areas became prominent provides some insight into the impact of state cultural policies on the formation of a *lok git* field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993). Bourdieu's idea of a 'field of cultural production' refers to an arena of social position-takings that are hierarchically structured, yet changing as they are reproduced through ongoing social interaction. More than one genre or music scene, it describes a broader range of interrelated artistic undertakings. The common term artists use, *lok dohori chetra*, literally *lok dohori* field, seems to connote much the same thing. This field includes both commercial and non-commercial aspects, and represents different versions of the nation that emphasise both sameness and difference, closely intertwined.

### ***Lok dohori and Panchayat-era cultural policies***

Policies in the Panchayat era emphasised national sameness at the expense of internal difference. Drawing on a version of nationalism that had developed among elites (Burghart 1984, Onta 1996a, 1996b and 1999), they emphasised the Hindu religion, along with the Nepali language, and promoted one form of dress, with the slogan *ek bhasa, ek bhash, ek desh* (Hangen 2010: 31). Shaphalya Amatya, in a report on Nepali cultural policy prepared for UNESCO in 1983, exemplifies the prevailing attitude of the times when he writes, 'Nepal is a typical Hindu society'. He acknowledges cultural diversity within the country, but explains it away as extreme, with the statement, 'It is interesting to note that the Sherpas, who live within easy reach of the world's highest peaks...have their own way of life that has very little in common with that of the inhabitants of the plains...But these extremes are exceptions' (1983: 12-13). The unmarked, unmentioned geographic term here is the hills, which have long been the centre of state-promoted Nepali/



Gorkhali nationalism, with the mountains and plains and their inhabitants written off as exceptions along with many other social groups that didn't exactly fit the Panchayat governments' ideas of what a shared national culture should be. Even within the hills, there are many groups which remained significantly marginalised in terms of access to political power and economic development. Yet, the marginalising effects of Panchayat unitary policies played a significant role in creating a backlash, thus causing the demise of these very policies, along with the demise of the government that created and enforced them (Lawoti and Hagen 2010).

During Panchayat years, official ideas of this shared national culture were promoted through the policies (Amatya 1983) that governed the education system (Ragsdale 1989), and the national media (Grandin 1989, 2005a and 2005b). The National Communication Plan (1972) charged media institutions with implementing 'communication for development', and, along with similar development-oriented education policies (Pigg 1992), shaped the orientation toward development that came to characterise Nepal's dominant national discourse. Included in this was the musical development of genres meant to represent the nation, carried out primarily at Radio Nepal. Radio Nepal was especially significant in forming this key set of sounds as the primary site of music recording and broadcast, until Music Nepal was founded, and cassette production in Nepal proliferated in 1983 (Grandin 1989 and 2005, Henderson 2002, Onta 2005).

As Amatya (1983) states in his report on Nepali cultural policy, Radio Nepal was the most efficient and influential of Nepal's media institutions, due to the fact that it reached the greatest number of people across the widest geographical area. The musical parameters of the broad national folk song genre, referred to simply as *lok git* or folk song, were consolidated at Radio Nepal from its inception in the 1950s through the 1980s, but especially during the 1960s. While initially the majority of staff in the *lok git* department originated in eastern Nepal and thus promoted songs from this region, this changed with the coming of Dharma Raj Thapa from the Pokhara area, who promoted songs and musicians from his home region. The development of transportation links between Kathmandu and the central western hills also facilitated the continued collection of songs and access to talented

musicians from this area. The relative prosperity of the central western hills since the mid-twentieth century, linked to these transportation networks but also to the local history of employment in the British and Indian armies, may also have played a role in the access of its musicians to the capital and to opportunities at Radio Nepal. Kumar Basnet, the next director of the *lok git* department, and the most prolific folk song collector in Nepal, also strongly promoted songs and musical styles from the central western hills. For this interconnected set of reasons, the style of folk music from this area came to dominate Radio Nepal's airwaves.

One of the important effects of Radio Nepal's choices on the commercial genre of Nepali *lok git* was the establishment of the instrumental ensemble that was used to accompany songs. This came to include the *madal* drum, the *bansuri* bamboo flute, and the *sarangi* as the core instruments, with the harmonium, guitar, mandolin, and others as supporting instruments. This ensemble remains central to the sound of commercial *lok git* today, now with the addition of more instruments and synthesised effects. These are only a few of the vast number of instruments that are actually used in the highly diverse musical traditions of Nepal. Even when songs from outside of the mainstream central-western hill styles were recorded (such as Kumar Basnet's many Tamang-style songs from the mountains and hills northeast of Kathmandu), the ensemble lent them a uniform sound (Henderson 2002/2003). The sound associated with this instrumentation remains the sound that is most recognisable to Nepalis as national today, representing one version of the nation that has become recognisable to the majority of the population, though not everyone agrees with it.<sup>4</sup>

*Dohori* was supported by the state in the 1980s, not by the most prestigious musical organisations like Radio Nepal, Ratna Recording, or the National Cultural Corporation (*sanskritik sansthan*, aka *rastriya nachghar*), but by the Ministry of Education and Sports.<sup>5</sup> This ministry

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<sup>4</sup> See Stirr 2009 for a detailed discussion of this process.

<sup>5</sup> Reasons for the lack of emphasis on *dohori* on Radio Nepal and at Ratna Recording in their earlier years include the time limitations of recording technology, whose three-minute song limit did not allow for a satisfactory length of lyrical exchanges; worries about what exactly singers might improvise in their couplets; and also, perhaps, an ideology among urbanites that ranked *dohori* as an inferior musical form. The

initiated national *dohori* competitions, run in tournament style along with dance and sports competitions, as part of the biannual National Games. Songs to be sung in the competitions were recorded and circulated beforehand so that all participants would be able to concentrate on improvising lyrics, rather than on learning the tune. Choices of songs again reflected the dominance of central-western hill styles, as all of those chosen came from this region. The original competition organiser Sharad Chandra Shah remembers that the original intent had been to use songs from different regions of the country, but this never happened. Songs used in these competitions became very well-known, and are still cited as classics and re-recorded on compilations that are meant to represent the best of Nepali folk songs.<sup>6</sup>

The reason for initiating these competitions, according to Shah, was an attempt to institutionalise *dohori* as a nationally unique form of communication between young men and women of all backgrounds. With the rise of commercial *dohori* since the establishment of a private music industry in the 1980s, Shah believes that his initiative succeeded, and he is content to let it run itself, paying little attention to what has become an entire *dohori* industry. Since 1991, the relationship between the Nepali state and folk song and dance competitions, showcase concerts, and recording has shrunk to include whatever is put on in-house at the Nepal Academy or *rastriya sanskritik sangh* (*rastriya nachghar*), local chambers of commerce sponsoring festivals at which performances take place, and the small percentage of recordings that continue to take place at Radio Nepal. Ways to make a living and gain prestige through performance are far more numerous in the private than in the public sector. But the rhetoric of unity and national cultural uniqueness that Shah cites as the impetus for establishing the competitions continues among artists in the field of *lok dohori*. For the artists surveyed for this article, there remains more at stake than just the continued existence of a music industry. Nostalgic for the memory

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competitions run by the Ministry of Education and Sports were highly significant in changing the place of *dohori* in Nepal's musical national imaginary.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the song *Mirmire Aankha*, used in one of the competitions, appears on several compilations of vocal and instrumental music that are prominent in the market today, including Kutumba's *Folk Roots* (2005) and Prabin Gurung's *Thet* (1998).

of state support that helped form their profession in the 1980s, they seek recognition from the state in various ways.

The 2010 National Cultural Policy and other culture-related policy documents from the past several years reiterate the idea that the state should support all kinds of cultural and artistic production in Nepal. The proposed methods are similar to those that have already been used with some success: in the suggestions for performing arts (9.41-9.44), festivals and competitions are proposed to promote new talent, with prizes for those who make significant contributions. This is also a model that private organisations rely on, and while state organisations provide prestige, private organisations are much better funded. Hence, there are many more privately-run competitions and prizes, and it is organisations like community radio that are promoting the circulation of non-commercial folk music at the regional level, to a greater extent than the state. Yet, the value placed on prestige conferred by state recognition remains important to artists. For this reason, along with other reasons discussed below such as the artists' own sense of national feeling, they remain interested in what the state might be able to do in support of their art. In the rest of this article, I analyse the field of *lok dohori* today from the perspectives of the performers, and this idea of desire for some state recognition, if not intervention, is a strand that runs through the themes articulated by them.

### ***Lok dohori today***

The history of *lok dohori* in the past thirty years has been one of professionalization, continuing the process started by state cultural institutions, but expanding primarily in the private and commercial sectors. The five major spheres of *lok dohori* performance today include the recording and broadcasting industry (primarily private except for Radio Nepal), the competition circuit (now primarily private), the concert circuit (both state and private), the restaurant and nightclub industry (private, informal sector), and the vast diversity of traditional contexts for performance that persist from before this process of professionalization began. Though these spheres within the *lok git* field of cultural production are each structured differently and represent different parts of the cultural economy, they are highly interrelated, such that the same artist may

participate in all of them on a regular basis, even within the span of a single day.

If the broad field of folk music in the Panchayat era was made up primarily of state-supported performance venues and local traditional performances, the advent of the private music production sector in the 1980s led to an increased professionalization of traditional practices, along pathways formed by previous state actions (Grandin 1989, Moisola 1991). When Music Nepal began to pay royalties, and the fruits of those royalties became visible in the changing lifestyles of artists, the private recording industry began to look like an attractive alternative to the state as a patron. Due in part to the reduced production and distribution expenses offered by music cassettes, as well as the relatively inexpensive equipment required to listen to them, this industry was able to offer a product that met a higher-than-expected demand, much of which was focused on *lok dohori* albums.<sup>7</sup> Now, in the age of digital downloads, the market for musical commodities has again changed drastically, although a full analysis is beyond the scope of this article. As in many other parts of the world, professional Nepali folk musicians have once again begun to rely on live performances as a primary source of music-related income.

Urban *dohori* restaurants started to emerge in Pokhara in the mid-1990s, and in Kathmandu the first one, Sundhara, opened in 1998. In the mid-2000s, the latter years of the civil war, there was a boom in *dohori* restaurants, which people in the music industry attributed to increasing in-migration from the rural hills, plus a concentration of capital in the Kathmandu Valley, due to the desire of individuals to avoid getting themselves or their money caught up in the armed conflict in hill areas. After the civil war, many of these people left, taking their capital with them. A few *dohori* restaurants then opened in district centres in the western hills, such as Damauli and Besisahar. When I began my research in 2005, there were an estimated 80 *dohori* restaurants in the Kathmandu Valley. The civil war ended in 2006, by 2007 the number of *dohori* restaurants was down to 48; and in 2015 before the earthquake, there were around 35 to 40. *Dohori* restaurants line the Ring Road around Kathmandu and Lalitpur, clustering around the long-distance bus park

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<sup>7</sup> See Stirr 2009, Chapter 2, for a more detailed discussion of this history.

in Gongabu; the places where buses head toward the east, from Chabahil through Baneshwor and Koteshwor around to Gwarkho; and the outlet of the Valley toward the south and west, from Swayambhu and Kalanki. In central areas, *dohori* restaurants concentrate in commercial centres that also hosted hotels and nightlife: Thamel, Kamaladi, Sundhara, and Pulchowk. While these locations to an extent reflect patterns of inter-regional migration (the clearest connections are those between former Singapore Police settled in Sundhara, and former British Gurkhas settled in Kamaladi, two groups of people with dependable disposable income, who mostly hail from the western hills and support *lok dohori* as their own regional culture), it is perhaps more accurate to say that they reflect patterns of movement between regions. The clientele of *dohori* restaurants includes people who have migrated or settled in Kathmandu and Lalitpur, along with people who often travel between the Kathmandu Valley and other areas of the country. The placement of *dohori* restaurants around the Ring Road (along with their musical offerings, as discussed below) has been aimed at people coming in or out of the Kathmandu Valley, as well as those people who settled in more inexpensive areas further outside of the city.

By providing many aspiring artists with steady employment, *dohori* restaurants have played a large role in supporting Nepali folk music in general over the last two decades. The restaurants employ a significant percentage of professional performers, including many performers with successful recording careers. Most contemporary *dohori* performers have done at least a short stint in a *dohori* restaurant before they moved on to studio recording, stage programs, or other primary musical sources of income. For this reason, I chose to survey *dohori* restaurant performers in the Kathmandu Valley in order to obtain demographic information that is applicable to the professionalised spheres of the *dohori* field as a whole. While I also formally carried out this survey in Pokhara, and informally in restaurants in other cities in the western hills and Tarai, here I focus on artists in the Kathmandu Valley because of their closeness to national-level policymakers, and the opportunities these artists have to interact with these policymakers.

I conducted a survey in all *dohori* restaurants in Kathmandu between March and June 2007. At 48 restaurants with an average of 12 performers per restaurant, I estimated that there were 576 *dohori*

restaurant performers in Kathmandu. I distributed forms to 544 people, which was 94% of the estimated population. Of the artists who received forms, 67% responded to the survey, providing us with data on 62% of *dohori* restaurant performers in Kathmandu. The survey collected demographic data and asked two open-ended questions of performers. Below I present the basic demographics and a content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions. My interpretations of survey data are informed significantly by my own participation in music in Nepal and my ethnographic research on music in Nepal since 2000. Importantly, I conducted this research before the drafting of the 2010 National Cultural Policy. The artists' thoughts expressed here share the concern of the policy with the promotion of cultural plurality; indeed, both the policy and this research emerged out of the same discursive moment. Attention to the *lok dohori* field and the concerns of its artists demonstrate how its location at the intersection of multiple different cultural categories both poses challenges and creates opportunities for applying cultural policy in the service of inclusivity.

### Basic demographics

The majority of *dohori* restaurant performers in the Kathmandu Valley originated in the central and western hills of Nepal.<sup>8</sup> A closer look at the home villages of the performers reveals that very few artists came from the high mountain areas within these zones. For example, those from Gorkha primarily came from the southern part of the district, and there were no performers from Manang. The ethnic and caste makeup reflects that of this broad region of the country: 22% of performers are Magar, 21% Chhetri, 19% Brahmin, 11% Gurung, and 11% from various hill Dalit castes. Other *janajati* groups, people from multi-caste/ethnic backgrounds, and people who did not respond to this question, make up the remaining 5%. The average age of performers is 23.9 years.

### Musical competence and demographics

Kathmandu *dohori* restaurants employ 40% women and 60% men as stage performers. There are more men on the stage, because men are

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<sup>8</sup> 30% hailed from the Gandaki Zone, 13% from Rapti Zone, 12% from Bagmati Zone, 12% from Lumbini Zone, 4% from Janakpur Zone, 4% from Sagarmatha Zone, and the remaining 12% from Narayani, Bheri, Mechi, Seti, and Karnali Zones.

hired both to play instruments and sing, and thus fill more positions than women, who are officially hired only as singers, although they do also play instruments in *dohori* restaurants.<sup>9</sup> On stage, an average of nine or ten performers present the nightly programme: three male and three female singers, two male *madal* players, one male flutist or *sarangi* player, and one male harmonium player. Someone will usually play the electric *drumpad* as well; this has become an equally male or female role for which no one is hired exclusively. Most paid players learn on the job. Other instruments sometimes included are the *panchai baja* instruments, the tabla, the *khajadi*, and the *damphu*—all specific to particular song genres—and the *dholak*, which is used in many different genres to give more punch to the beat and to get customers on the dance floor. Some *dohori* restaurants also offer cultural dance performances, employing both male and female dancers and experienced choreographers.

Performing in *dohori* restaurants requires particular musical skills. In addition to being good at improvising poetic lyrics, to be a *dohori* restaurant singer requires both an encyclopedic knowledge of songs within which to insert improvised couplets, and the ability to learn new lyrics on the fly, in order to fulfil customer requests and to create an appropriate mood in the restaurant. Most performers spend a good deal of time outside of their restaurant jobs watching music videos on TV and VCDs, and listening to songs on the radio, cassettes, and mobile phones. Still, it is common for performers to have to learn a new song on stage, and to have never heard the original recordings of some popularly requested tunes. Instrumentalists also have to know how to play in a wide variety of genres, and how to both follow and guide inexperienced singers, especially patrons who may sing from their tables or the dance floor.

The particular performance expectations for people in different roles are reflected to a degree in the backgrounds of the performers.

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<sup>9</sup> Other staff besides performers (waitstaff, kitchen staff, security staff, janitorial staff, managers, etc.) were not included in this survey. Another survey conducted by the Lok *Dohori* Professionals' Organization in three Kathmandu *dohori* restaurants in 2006 (n=75) showed that non-performing staff were primarily from the ethnic groups Newar, Tamang, Rai, and Chhetri (in descending order), and came from the Kathmandu Valley, its immediately surrounding districts, and eastern districts. In Kathmandu *dohori* restaurants, the waitstaff are primarily female; in some others, such as Butwal's Tinahu *Dohori* Sanjh, the waitstaff are all male.



Women, who are employed as singers only, tend to come more from the central and western hills, which are home to the predominant musical styles of *lok git* and *dohori*; many women also come from *janajati* backgrounds where learning to sing and dance in public, and doing so professionally, is not looked down upon as much as among high-caste Hindu groups. Men, who are employed both as singers and instrumentalists, have more diverse regional, ethnic, and caste roots. For example, like most women, some hail from the central and western hills and aspire to be *lok dohori* singers, while specialists in *adhunik git* (“modern songs”) are more often from the east, and actually only learnt the musical conventions of the popular western-hills style of *dohori* and other western-Nepali *lok git* genres after coming to the restaurant. Still others aspire to break into the world of pop music, usually through the genre of *lok pop*.<sup>10</sup> While most of the women aspire to have careers in the *lok dohori* world, having entered as *lok dohori* singers, many of the men are there because the *dohori* restaurant provides a steady income source while they pursue other options, either in another area of the music industry or in another field entirely (Stirr 2010, 2009). Furthermore, *dohori* restaurants are the primary source of income for most women, while many men have additional sources of income.

When I did this survey, one of the things many performers asked me to emphasise in the report was their level of education. They emphasised this because of the discrimination they perceived to be directed toward them from Kathmandu Valley residents who label *dohori* restaurant performers as uneducated rural hicks. This was in direct contrast to how the performers saw themselves. By far the most common category performers listed in this survey as other occupation was that of student (18%). Many of the performers support themselves by performing in *dohori* restaurants while they study in colleges and universities. The caste and ethnic makeup of these student-performers reflects the makeup of the field as a whole, with a slightly higher number of Brahmin men enrolled in degrees. At B.A. degree level and

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<sup>10</sup> Greene’s (2002/2003) article on *lok pop* describes the genre in Pokhara in the 1990s as one that memorialises rurality. While this attitude may still characterise some urban producers and performers of *lok pop*, in the 2000s, especially in central and western-hills villages, the genre has come to represent a modernised, rather than memorialised, rurality.

higher, there is no significant pattern of ethnic, caste, or regional background. Furthermore, the percentage of *dohori* restaurant performers with a B.A. (18%) or M.A. degree (3.5%) is higher than the national average.<sup>11</sup> And the majority of male performers (though not of female performers) have completed secondary education up to the SLC or higher, which is also higher than the national average. Even those who have only completed primary education, or no formal education, are keen to dispel the myth of *lok git* performers in general as being uneducated, as a lack of education is often a euphemism for a low status of other kinds. The performers see themselves as artists, having chosen a profession that requires specific skills and talents that deserve to be respected, valued, and supported in their own right.

### ***Artists' hopes and concerns for the field***

In the survey, I asked performers for their reasons for becoming artists, and their opinions on what changes, if any, they would like to see in the *lok dohori* field. I used nVivo qualitative analysis software to perform a simple keyword-in-context analysis of responses, and then translated the responses into English. The words used below represent the dominant themes in the responses that were given. Most of the performers indicated that they became *lok dohori* artists out of a personal interest in the field and their own ambitions, others expressed a concern for culture and preservation. The most commonly occurring word in responses to the question on possible reasons for becoming an artist is interest/desire (*iccha*), followed by culture (*sanskriti*) and variations of the concept of preservation (*samrakshan*). The response, "I became an artist to preserve the country's folk culture and to fulfil my

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<sup>11</sup> The 2001 census includes data for people over the age of 6 as an aggregate group; thus, the percentage is obviously going to be smaller (1.8% with higher education) (Manandhar and Shrestha 2002:255). Predictably, among *lok dohori* performers, men have had more education than women, as is the case nationally. As reported on the survey forms, 6% of men have M.A.'s, 22% have B.A.'s, 29% have I.A.'s, and 29% stopped their education after passing the SLC. 9% have some primary education under the SLC level, 3% are literate but have no formal education, 1% have formal musical qualifications only, and 1% did not respond. Of the women, 8% have B.A.'s, 16% have I.A.'s, and 20% stopped their education after passing the SLC. 40% have some formal education under the SLC level, and 12% are literate but did not have formal education. The 4% of women who did not respond to this question may also fall within this category, as they were obviously literate enough to fill out the forms, and the education level was a self-reported category rather than a box to check.

aspirations” can be understood as representative of the majority of responses to this question.

In response to the question on what changes, if any, they would like to see in the *lok dohori* field, artists went into greater depth about their concerns regarding the field as a whole. In general, artists desired a greater amount of public respect and value, in accordance with the high-level official discourse about folk music and cultural preservation within which they framed their profession. I identified keywords in their responses that defined three main themes running through the responses: preservation, development, and respect and value, which I examine together along with another keyword, degeneration. These themes overlap considerably, but also sometimes exert tension on each other.

### **Preservation**

Official state discourse in Nepal values cultural heritage and its preservation. The language of the 2010 Cultural Policy reflects this, as does the commercial music industry. The folk music industry in Nepal has been framed as a means of cultural preservation ever since the beginning of Radio Nepal’s folk music recordings in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, the folk music industry took place at the level of the state: Radio Nepal and the state-owned Ratna Recording employed artists, made recordings, and disseminated them, with the aim of cultural preservation and promotion rather than profit. The same set of values informs artists in today’s music industry, though within this discourse, it is the recording of tunes that matters, rather than their musical arrangements. The prevailing ideology remains one of oral tradition, and *dohori* restaurants are important sites for the oral transmission of recorded songs, which themselves often draw from existing songs that may or may not have been recorded before. Thus, the industry remains close to non-commercial practices of music making, in a manner that is very similar to that which Stefan Fiol (2011) describes for the popular folk music industry in neighbouring Kumaon and Garwhal. Individuals, along with melodies and words, can easily circulate between commercial and non-commercial spheres, while instrumentation and arrangements set commercial and non-commercial songs apart. *Dohori* restaurant performers see their actions as a contribution to cultural

preservation by promoting rural hill folk music genres in the capital city, as one artist expressed it in a term paper for his bachelor's degree in music (Poudel 2002), and both on the survey forms and in conversations many other performers also express their desire to contribute to cultural preservation in the best possible way.

One major subtheme related to cultural preservation is authenticity, as expressed in answers to the question of what should change in the commercial *lok dohori* field:

However many songs are made, I hope that Nepali culture and authenticity will shine through in them all.

Nepali *lok dohori* is pure, genuine Nepali. Unlike other genres it has no western influence in it. Thus I hope that its authenticity is not lost.

We shouldn't let our authenticity, traditions and customs fade away. I feel that it would be good to not let new creations overshadow older creations.

I hope that the songs that are pure and authentic, the seasonal songs, and the kinds of songs palatable to all of society will be preserved.

I hope for good changes in *lok dohori*, which will help ensure that according to *lok dohori*, *salaijo*, *kauda*, *jhyaure* and other such customs, songs will continue to be sung forever in our own authentic languages. I hope that western culture doesn't influence authentic Nepali *lok dohori* to lean towards western languages, and that the folk songs from Tarai to Himal will continue to resound throughout our rural areas, without forgetting our motherland Nepal, Nepali customs, Nepali ways of life.

The organisations related to this field should think seriously about this. As folk music is part of Nepali cultural identity the state should also concern itself with its preservation. With an eye to the circulation of *lok dohori*, there needs to be more concentration on the authentic (*thet*) and the genuine (*maulik*).

The mentions of authenticity here highlight the national cultural heritage in music and language as opposed to influence from western culture, and appear to value the old over the new. These emphases

reflect the common official language of cultural preservation and promotion, and come across as rather dutiful. But greater commitment and professional involvement with music are apparent when it comes to invocations of different folk genres.

Performers in the *lok dohori* field see themselves as versatile in terms of genre and style, as custodians of a wide range of styles of folk music, beyond those styles that dominate the recording industry. In fact, while western-hills-style *dohori* dominates the industry production of cassettes (and now mp3s), restaurants present a more varied range of regional styles in folk music performances. This depends, to some extent, on the patterns of settlement and temporary residence within the Kathmandu Valley, and the preferences of restaurant clientele in different areas of the city. The Kathmandu-area *kathe git dohori* song style<sup>12</sup> is a favourite of many *dohori* restaurants that cater to patrons from this area. In 2007-8, this included many of the *dohori* restaurants in Chabahil and Gaushala, as well as in Gwarkho—those restaurants around the eastern edge of Kathmandu’s Ring Road. These restaurants were also more likely to employ singers from eastern areas of the country; the few female singers from eastern ethnic groups including Rai and Sherpa were employed in restaurants lining the Ring Road in Chabahil. Specialising in songs of a particular region does not necessarily mean that these singers come from these regions; rather, it may mean that they have worked to develop these skills as a part of becoming professional performers. For example, Rajkumar Rayamajhi of Lalitpur Rodhi Club, originally from Palpa, is the restaurant’s male specialist in *Kathe* songs, which he learned only after he came to Kathmandu to become a professional singer. Versatility and a broad knowledge of folk musical genres is seen as a professional skill worthy of being developed.

Performers routinely attempt to broaden their competence in ranges of traditional genres, through recordings on cassette and VCD, as well as by listening to other performers in the *dohori* restaurants where they work, at competitions, and at rural festivals where the stage performance is but one venue for making music, and music making often continues all night long after the official show has ended.

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<sup>12</sup> The *kathe git* sound is exemplified in recordings by singers such as Navaraj Ghorasaini and Gita Devi.

Sometimes, performers draw on the melodies, rhythms, and words of the songs they hear at such festivals when they create new songs for their own albums. The process of circulation and learning during which songs and singers move in and out of the commercial domain into different forms and roles is central to the commercial world of *lok dohori*, there is considerable overlap between commercial and non-commercial songs and performances and the boundaries are constantly in motion, in a process that is perhaps even more complex and involves more steps than the similar process in neighbouring Uttarakhand that Stefan Fiol referred to as a movement ‘from folk to popular and back’ (2010). *Dohori* restaurants are important nodes in this network, where commercially recorded songs often circulate and change in performance, and where their origins sometimes hold significance and sometimes slip into obscurity.

In this complex relationship among urban centres, towns, and rural villages, among the recording industry and the various levels of commercial and non-commercial live performances, what is commonly understood by the term preservation actually revolves around rurality. The recording industry and the live performance industry are seen as a means of preservation of rural songs and dances, transmitted through oral traditions, but preserved for posterity in their commercial incarnations. Thus, the nature of the songs that are recorded and performed in the commercial world is a topic of debate, with strong calls for commercial products to retain and promote aesthetic and ethical values associated with rural life. Some survey responses illustrate this:

In my opinion, our village homes and the earth of our country should speak through our songs.

Others express the wish that commercial *dohori* should ‘remain Nepali cultural’ and express the best of Nepali culture. The debate over what commercial recordings and performances should be like revolves around changes brought by the commercialisation and professionalization of *lok dohori* performance, viewed from different perspectives as both development and degeneration.

## Development

The idea of preservation is connected in complicated ways to the idea of development. For some in Nepal, development means moving away from rurality, at least implicitly (Pigg 1992). For most in the *lok dohori* field, development means a positive change rooted in valued aspects of rural life, sometimes framed in terms of past glories, and sometimes framed in terms of valuable present or aspirational practices. As in any nostalgic genre, the valued aspects of rurality and past-ness are chosen according to present concerns. For many, development means the continued flourishing of the genre, combined with a sense that it is progressing, as this respondent expresses: 'May *dohori* occupy an even greater place in Nepal than it does now; may this musical field not just fade away; may it develop even further.' The discourse of development as progress in *dohori* has two main aims: that of musical development, and that of social development through music.

The discourse of musical development stems from the transformation of performance practice from village contexts to urban commercial contexts. In village contexts for performing *dohori*, instrumental accompaniment is often optional, and the primary instrument used to accompany *dohori* singing is the *madal*. People do not always pay attention to the tuning of the *madal*, and prefer to sing in a key that suits their voice. Women and men who sing *dohori* with each other may not always sing in the same key. *Madal* playing is often directed at dancing rather than singing, cueing the dancers and thus promoting repetitions of the same musical phrase for purposes of dancing, rather than cueing singers as to when to move on to a new musical phrase. All of this changes when village-trained performers become professionals.

Since the days of Radio Nepal, *lok git* has become an ensemble genre, and performers discuss musical development in terms of competence in ensemble playing. Radio Nepal's voice tests and instrumental tests still primarily examine whether or not a performer knows the basic things necessary to perform in an ensemble: how to play in tune and in time, or *sur* and *tal*. As these may be employed differently than the performer is used to, this is a bigger challenge than it might initially seem. Instrumentalists in particular are frustrated with singers who often appear to display no understanding of *sur* and *tal*, a problem that is

complicated by the prevailing ideology in which singers are the focus of the industry. So, the most common development-related response in the survey relates to the necessity of performers gaining musical knowledge. For example:

There is a lack of musical knowledge among the artists. Even if they only study the basics, they should study those and only then step onto the stage.

The change that is most needed in *lok dohori* is good concentration on musical elements like tuning and timing, I hope that these are taken more into consideration.

People involved in *lok dohori* have little musical knowledge. They have to enter this field with prior education.

One respondent took the idea of musicians lacking formal ensemble training further, and connected it to the stereotype that most folk musicians are illiterate. Survey data actually shows that this is not the case: everyone who filled out a form had at least basic literacy, and the majority of performers have education beyond the SLC level. It is likely that the person who wrote this would have known this, so illiteracy here stands in for more than just its literal meaning, implying rural backwardness and lack of modernity (Pigg 1992). While this is the only response that blatantly referred to this stereotype, others acknowledged the tension between the desire to preserve what is valued and the feeling that there are some aspects of culture best left behind by progress. One person initially expressed a dislike of remakes of old songs and argued that nothing should change in *dohori*, but then came up with a list of desirable changes.

Still others explicitly linked music and social improvement:

*Lok dohori* is that sector which no one has to change. It will polish itself with the passage of time. Time will change it. I feel that way. Distorting songs by old artists to make it conform to the demands of 21st century and basking in that glory is nothing but trying to show one's inadequacy under the guise of 21st century. I want these kinds of changes--our society still maintains old thinking; may bitter culture be transformed and presented in tender language. May *lok*



*dohori* be palatable to everyone's eyes and ears. May music bring changes in people's behaviour. *Lok dohori* should speak our upbringing. May we not copy others but may the world emulate *lok dohori*.

I feel that we should create rhythms and tunes that bring social awareness and alertness and further strengthen society (through music).

For these performers, *lok dohori* has a responsibility to society to help create positive social change, which goes along with preservation. One person connects development with songs that help maintain a sense of history, connecting development and preservation:

I feel that what the *lok dohori* field can do for an undeveloped place like Nepal is create awareness about development; help preserve old tunes based on pertinent events.

Another person focuses on ethnic diversity and the challenge of maintaining the uniqueness of different traditional musical styles when they become the basis for *lok dohori* songs of the professional, ensemble variety.

Change is good with change in time. Even if there is change, we should not let our authenticity and genuineness disappear. Different ethnic groups have their own songs but they should retain their authenticity even if they are converted into folk songs. In addition, I also want *lok dohori* to get an identity in other countries.

This response exemplifies a dual significance of the term identity in the *dohori* field today, and more broadly in all of Nepal, where ethnic/regional and national identities are both important, but the means of reconciling them is unclear. What is development, and what is dissolution of identity? How important are which aspects of identity? These questions play out to some extent in aesthetic debates about songs. While I will not go into the particulars of such debates here, I will note that a tension exists in other responses between promoting the originality of songs and preserving traditional culture; the above response is prescient in identifying a need to promote the musical styles of different ethnic groups. Within the past few years since the survey

was completed, I see this as one of the newer developments in the industry. Now, *lok dohori* artists are increasingly choosing to include songs beyond the mainstream *lok git* and *dohori* formats in their albums. There is an increase in regional song production (Stirr 2012), as well as in the production of songs in languages other than Nepali. According to my conversations with some older artists who have been in the field for decades, such as singer and instrumentalist Krishna Gurung of the National Cultural Corporation/Rastriya Nachghar; singer, songwriter, and novelist Hiranya Bhojpure, formerly of Radio Nepal and Lekali Cultural Group; and even *lok dohori* star Komal Oli, this is not so much a new development but more like a correction. They see the incorporation of a variety of genres and styles as a return of professional folk music to the days when a greater variety of song styles were more common in the *lok git* market, before the *dohori* boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Finally, ethnic and regional media have found growing niches in the recording industry, and I would not be surprised if songs in ethnic and regional languages begin to be performed in *dohori* restaurants. To discuss these changes under the category of development links them with changes in state cultural policy and the social movements that have shaped the policy, in which the understanding of unity and diversity, and the fluid relationships among multiple identities continue to evolve.

### **Respect and value**

As *dohori* performers see themselves as being engaged in a project of preservation and development, they are concerned with changing what they see as an unfair stigmatisation of the genre. One of the major phrases that is common both in the media and in survey responses that address respect and value, as well as in everyday talk about *dohori* by performers and fans, is the phrase *vikriti visangati*, degeneration and disharmony. *Vikriti* is often used as a euphemism for what some consider to be an excessive expression of sexuality in performances, in music videos, and in song words. *Sanskriti*, culture, and *vikriti*, degeneration, are often placed in rhetorical opposition to each other, facilitated by the fact that the words rhyme. But this rhyme also metaphorically signals that separating the two is not always straightforward.

Much of the stigma faced by *dohori* performers has to do with the association of *dohori* and sexuality, which is rooted in the traditions of many ethnic groups of *dohori* singing as a courtship practice that often includes bawdy lyrics,<sup>13</sup> and modern, urban (mis)interpretations of these traditions that frame female performers as being sexually available. The atmosphere in a *dohori* restaurant is intended to resemble the atmosphere in a Gurung or Magar village at festival time, as is shown by the common invocation of the *rodhi* traditions of Gurung and Magar culture, as well as a more generalised festival atmosphere. All of these are contexts in which public singing and dancing by women in general are *not* traditionally considered to be morally suspect.<sup>14</sup> This contrasts with conservative Hindu views that proscribe the public performance of women in most contexts.<sup>15</sup> The clash of these two different views leads to many misunderstandings: some patrons expect female performers to be sexually available, and reactions to this perception contribute to discourses of purification among *dohori* performers and fans. Some survey responses in this vein include:

Cutting down on the 'dirtiness' [*phohori*] that's come along with *dohori*, my wish is for it to be purely cultural.

Obscenity or lack of control [*chhadapan*] should be done away with.

The degenerations that have come into this field and the public's negative view of it should be changed.

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<sup>13</sup> Including, but not limited to: Gurung *rodhi* and Magar *basghar* along with other multi-ethnic songfests, in which various song genres are performed as *dohori/juhari*; Limbu *dhan nach*, Tamang and Sherpa *selo*, northeastern *hakpare* and *gothalo git*, far-western *deuda*, and the various forms of *sawal-jawab gan* of the Tarai, performed in Hindi, Maithili, Bhojpuri, etc.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the Gurung *rodhi*, see Andors 1976, Macfarlane 2003, Messerschmidt 1976, Neupane 2011, Pignede 1966, Moisola 1989, 1991, and Stirr 2009. *Dohori* does not, however, have roots in traditions of hereditary female performers or *mujra* style performance and thus *dohori* restaurants are quite different from the *mujra* establishments of northern India and Pakistan, where hereditary female singers and dancers, backed by male instrumentalists, sing and dance for male patrons (see Qureshi 2008; Brown 2007). Performers trained in these styles can be found among the Badi caste of western Nepal, among whom both men and women have historically been hereditary performers (see Singh BK, n.d.).

<sup>15</sup> An exception is the festival of Teej, about which much has been written (see for example Ahearn 1998; Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994).

Singer Srijana Pun, who performs in a *dohori* restaurant and also works at a women's rights NGO (WOFOWON), connects stigmatisation with a focus on bodily display rather than on musical and poetic competence. She invokes a nostalgic narrative of valued aspects of rural life as part of her argument that *dohori* and *dohori* performers should be accorded greater social value:

In fact, *lok dohori* used to be a tradition of singing authentic folk tunes, as women and men expressed their words back and forth through the medium of song in village homes, forests and fields, *chautaris* and the custom of *rodhi*. Now, these songs are used commercially in the hotels and restaurants of the city, where they are accorded little or no value. Here in the city *dohori* restaurant managers look only at empty outer beauty; because of this it is only a matter of time before the *lok dohori* field will slip out of everyone's mind. In the name of *lok dohori* we, Nepali sisters, are subject to various kinds of bodily exploitation; even so, so many *dohori* restaurant employees continue to endure it. I want to say that, leaving this kind of degeneration behind and giving real *dohori* the value it deserves, we should create and follow a positive road.

Here Srijana does not mean that *dohori* songs shouldn't be performed in commercial venues, but rather that no matter where they are performed, the songs and the performers should be treated with respect. She continues to perform as a *dohori* singer in a restaurant because she enjoys it, and has the means to quit if she wishes. Her wish is for the conditions in which she performs to be more congruent with her own idea of her performance as maintaining a valuable folk tradition. Similarly, another artist writes,

Artists are the jewels of any nation. Thus art and voice [*kala ra gala*] should be properly valued. On top of that *lok dohori* is music within our own country. That is why I want real valuation of art and voice based on talent and not on nepotism and beauty.

The word translated here as 'valuation' is *mulyankan*, which can also be translated as 'evaluation'; however, the context in which this

respondent and others use the word implies more than just a musical evaluation of performance on its own terms. It implies a desired positive valuation of *lok dohori* within society and the nation, and a concomitant appreciation for excellence in performance. It also has to do with financial remuneration. At many *dohori* restaurants, performers have to ask for their salaries each month, rather than receiving them regularly. Often, artists who ask for their salaries will be denied them, and instead face insulting behaviour from owners or managers.<sup>16</sup> One artist referred to the practice of withholding salary and said, ‘this is the real *vikriti!*’ Salary forms a consistent theme in survey responses, with two particularly prominent issues: being paid on time or at all, and transparency in the allocation of salary amounts. Performers ask

[t]hat artists be paid satisfactorily according to their abilities and that salaries be given on time.  
May all artists get paid on an equal, honest scale.

In general, *dohori* restaurant performers argue that if they were truly valued in the way that official discourses of cultural heritage frame their profession and their art, they would not face the financial hardships that they currently face. Familiar with rhetoric such as ‘artists are the jewels of the nation’, they would like to see some material confirmation of what often seems like empty praise. The legacy of patronage systems, including the state patronage of the Panchayat era, influences their claims upon the state to do something to demonstrate to the nation that folk music—including commercial *lok dohori*—is a valuable tradition that is worthy of support.

## Conclusion

Due to its sometimes bawdy lyrics and the uncertainty of what performers might say in live improvisations, its history of association

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<sup>16</sup> This is also true for restaurants (*lok dohori* and pop/*adhunik*/Hindi-song-oriented) in UK and US migrant communities, but, significantly, it is not true of the *dohori* and dance restaurants I visited in Bahrain (see Stirr forthcoming). Performers are particularly keen to go to the Gulf despite its drawbacks, because they know from the experiences of others that they will actually be paid the promised salary on time and without having to fight for it. And, it should also be noted, the withholding of salaries is not limited to the world of hotels and restaurants, but has been common in many fields of business in Nepal.

with elopements, and its current commercial profile, *dohori* unsettles unitary ethnicising and nationalising narratives, along with purist discourses of cultural heritage, or easy dichotomies of the folkloric and the commercial. It remains associated with messy boundary-crossings, transgressive flirtations, night-time elopements, and the ways in which such transgressive desires have both been encoded in traditional social norms and structures through formal and informal proscriptions, and commodified and celebrated through the music industry and the broader night-time entertainment industry in the growing urban areas of Nepal. *Dohori* restaurants are sites where visions of the nation as unitary, the nation as made up of diverse cultures living and interacting together, and the nation as a place of shifting boundaries between changeable identities, all come into contact and sometimes conflict with each other. And as we have seen, *dohori* restaurants employ artists with diverse musical aims, who see themselves as dedicated to the preservation and development of a tradition and who believe that state policies and initiatives regarding art and culture should also apply to them and take their perspective into account.

The responses of *dohori* restaurant performers to questions about the state of their profession, and their reasons for becoming artists, sum up their wishes to be seen as contributors to the nation in terms of preserving and developing aspects of Nepali culture, and their wishes for their particular contributions to be recognised. The commercial *lok dohori* field, especially the restaurants that support live performances, has the potential to be a site of great creativity, committed not only to mainstream nationalist musical styles, but also to varied ethnic and regional styles that individual performers bring with them from their home communities, as well as to a creative integration of these styles across genres from *lok dohori* to *adhunik* and pop. If we regard these performers solely within the category of their main means of making a living in the *lok dohori* industry, we might miss their wide range of musical backgrounds and ambitions.

Nationalisms are configurations of moralities, and state policies aim, among other things, to define a moral order among those they govern (Herzfeld 2005: 62, 71). Cultural policy at the state level is one means by which that moral order is legislated, disseminated, broadcast, and performed. This article has focused on state-led ideas of cultural

nationalism put in practice in cultural policies, from the perspective of artists who interact with and would like to be recognised as contributors to their national culture. There is still a strong idea among *dohori* performers and other workers in the culture industries that the state should be an important arbiter of value. This stems less from nostalgia for censorious Panchayat-era unitary policies than from dissatisfaction with free-market approaches in the culture industries, and memories of the positive aspects of state patronage. Their perspectives analysed above support the embrace by Nepal of inclusivity as a moral framework for the nation in its cultural policy, and they express a wish for actions of the state that would clearly demonstrate that multiple sets of aesthetic values are welcomed and valued as intrinsic aspects of the nation.

Building on the concerns of artists as outlined above, I add a few recommendations of my own. As Nepal implements the current National Cultural Policy, the challenge now is to avoid the pattern that Panchayat-era cultural promoters fell into, and to inclusively promote practices and genres from outside the current mainstream, thus demonstrating that these practices and genres are considered valuable at a national level.

To do this, the state itself need not launch a new search for cultural forms worthy of promotion, as there are many organisations and individuals that have the capacity to do this, and they are already taking on these responsibilities. The Nepal Folklore Society is one example; organisations supporting groups of artists, such as the Folk and Duet Song Academy Nepal, provide further options. If the state wishes to work with these organisations, perhaps it can make some small changes in one particular policy: that of awards and prizes. Instead of offering prizes and awards only to those who have already accomplished great things, a small-grants program would encourage artists or others who wish to support cultural practices to do things that might not otherwise be financially possible. This would acknowledge the perspective of artists that preservation and development go hand in hand, while also making a statement about the value of diverse cultural forms.

The creative world of cultural production is also intimately tied to labour. Commercial performance venues, like *dohori* restaurants, pay cultural workers' salaries; the main complaint of workers is that these

salaries are not guaranteed. This problem is actually widespread across many industries, beyond the cultural. A carefully crafted labour policy that helps performance venues stay in business while paying the salaries of their workers on time could be highly significant as an indirect cultural policy. The implications of such a policy are challenging: would enforcing payment of salaries in *dohori* restaurants, for example, require a full-scale formalisation of what today remains an informal sector? Would such a move actually cause more businesses to close, and leave the artists they employ worse off? Despite these challenges, the intersection of cultural policy with a living cultural economy is important to consider at the level of policy implementation. Through applying cultural policy in a truly inclusive spirit, the Nepali state can help re-assert the importance of Nepal's cultural traditions among its citizens, demonstrating to artists of all kinds that they are respected at levels beyond that of rhetoric.

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# **Gendered mobilities and return migration: a study of highly skilled female returnees in Nepal**

Karen Valentin and Laxmi Dhungel

In Nepal, as elsewhere in the world, an increasing number of women migrate, either with relatives or independently. One avenue for women of the middle- and upper classes is that of international education, which has opened up new avenues for young Nepali in general (Ghimire and Maharjan 2015, Sijapati 2009/2010, Valentin 2012, 2015). Some women travel on their own with the intent to study, whereas others migrate for other reasons, and enter educational programmes later during their stay abroad. They share their exposure to new social worlds, obtained partly by engaging with educational settings and pedagogical practices different to those they know from Nepal, partly by navigating a range of new social environments outside their educational institutions (Valentin 2015). Some of these women eventually return to Nepal, either planning to temporarily move on to other destinations, or with the intent to resettle on a permanent basis. These women's experience of returning is the focus of this article. It first examines the relationship between expanded geographical and social circles and others' expectations of middle-class women, and how this is embedded in gendered ideas of mobility. Second, it explores how, upon their return to Nepal, women interpret the experience gained from migrating and living abroad, and how the exposure to new ideas of womanhood contributes to shaping their self-understanding as women in contemporary Nepal (cf. Gardner and Osella 2003).

Addressing the link between gender and mobility, feminist-inspired scholarship on migration has shown that until the 1980s women were a neglected category in migration studies, both empirically and theoretically (e.g. Thapan 2005; Donato et al. 2006; Brettell 2008). Since then, there has been an analytical recognition of the disadvantages inherent in treating females as secondary to males and as necessarily deprived of agency, whether they remain at home or follow male relatives. This has led to a general analytical rethinking of the role of gender in the processes of geographical mobility, including a focus on

males' and females' differing experiences of such movement, settlement, and return (e.g. Afsar 2011; Brettell 2008; Donato et al. 2006), and how male and female mobility trajectories are deeply entangled in intersecting hierarchies of power across multiple social and spatial scales (Pessar and Mahler 2003).

Analysed in a transnational perspective, 'return' refers to both the actual return migration of people, and to the social remittances, that is, ideas and practices that are circulated globally through processes of migration, not only through individuals knowing each other personally, but also through institutionalized networks such as migrant and hometown associations (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2010). From this perspective, returning migrants, as potential carriers of such ideas and practices, may play an instrumental role in bringing about social change in their home societies. In line with this, and based on a study of Nepali student returnees, Anita Ghimire and Kabin Maharjan (2015: 105) conclude that returnees have an undeniably positive effect on Nepali society, bringing new ideas, approaches, and technologies to workplaces, for example. They explicitly acknowledge the gendered character of the labour market, but do not discuss the implications of this any further in relation to the use of skills in the context of return migration of men and women (ibid: 93).

In her study of spouses accompanying Indian IT workers returning from the US to India, Amy Bhatt (2015) sheds light on return migration as a gendered phenomenon which involves a constant negotiation of gender roles and relations. In a South Asian context this is complicated by dominant patriarchal gender patterns, into which women must reinscribe themselves upon their return (ibid.). Picking up this thread, this article focuses on highly skilled Nepali women's experience of return, and how their exposure to, and confrontation with, other social and professional realities encountered abroad allow them to reflect on the qualities of the social relations and practices framing their current lives in Nepal, in both negative and positive terms. It is not the intention of this article to document effects of return migration on Nepali society, nor to assess it in normative terms, but to analyse how women themselves perceive their social positions in light of experiences gained abroad and changing circumstances in Nepali society.

In the following section we present the methodological basis of this

article, and then describe the recent historical trends of Nepali migration, with particular attention paid to its gendered character. Drawing on interviews with highly skilled female returnees, we proceed to a discussion of the way in which these women, upon their return, have had to work out new positions in both public and domestic spheres. The last section focuses on how, irrespective of the specific location in which it took place, education acquired abroad is linked to a particular set of qualities informing these women's self-understanding.

### **Studying highly educated female returnees**

Drawing on qualitative data collected individually by the two authors, this article is based on the findings of the study 'The Returns of Educational Migration in Nepal',<sup>1</sup> the aim of which has been to explore the 'returns' of migration, that is, how academic and social skills acquired abroad are reinterpreted and applied when re-establishing a life back in Nepal. With a specific focus on gender, Laxmi Dhungel conducted her fieldwork in Kathmandu from March to November 2014 as part of her doctoral research on highly educated female migrants who have pursued their studies abroad and returned to Nepal. The data consists of structured, in-depth interviews with 47 women, informal conversations that took place before and after the interviews, and observation in homes, workplaces, and at various social events in which the women were involved. Most of the data presented in this article stems from interview material, and reveal narrative constructions of experiences and future expectations of a socially and economically privileged group of Nepali women, as these are framed by a complex of personal aspirations, family obligations, and societal demands.

The informants were women between 30 and 50 who had returned to Nepal from America, Australia, the U.K., Norway, the Netherlands, Japan, and India, among other places, with the aim of resettling, but in some cases the return had turned out to be more difficult than expected, and came to be seen as just another step in a longer migratory journey. Some had left Nepal as single women intending to study

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<sup>1</sup> A sub-study of the collaborative research project, 'Nepal on the Move. Conflict, Migration and Stability', financed by Danida, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

abroad; others had left for other reasons, such as marriage, and decided to study later during their stay abroad. As graduates in a wide range of disciplines, including business management, the humanities, education, and engineering, most had entered professional careers upon their return to Nepal, in government institutions, private companies or NGOs, or independent businesses. Only a few fell outside the formal labour market, and struggled to find employment. This data is supplemented by a broader data set collected by Karen Valentin between 2010 and 2014, on Nepali students in Denmark, their mobility trajectories and transnational livelihoods, and as the expectations and experiences of their return to Nepal.<sup>2</sup> Although this part of the project did not initially privilege a gender perspective, it turned out to be a more prominent issue than first expected. Although the first wave of Nepali students arriving in Denmark in around 2004-2007 consisted primarily of young men, a cohort of young women followed a few years later, mostly as 'dependents', the term they applied to themselves to refer to their legal status as spouses of students holding temporary residence permits. Some had to break off their own studies to come to Denmark to support their husbands' studies with economic contributions earned in unskilled labour, others began studying in Denmark, and some were rejected by the Danish authorities and had to either return to Nepal or go elsewhere. Thus, the ethnographic material consists of data gathered through participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations among both male and female students in Denmark, and from interviews conducted with returning students and relatives during recurrent, short-term visits to Nepal. The student-dependent relationship is a window to understanding how migration, education, and work intersect in both individual and family-based mobility strategies, and how this complexity of differing motivations facilitates new gendered identities.

The informants presented in this article are urban, educated, and mostly high-caste women. Furthermore, with reference to specific performative practices and claims to a distinct social identity (cf. Dickey

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<sup>2</sup> This formed part of another, recently completed collaborative project, 'Education, Mobility and Citizenship. An Anthropological Study of Educational Migration to Denmark' (2010-2014), funded by The Danish Council for Independent Research, Humanities.



2012, Liechty 2003), many of the informants explicitly identified themselves as middle-class. This was revealed in statements such as, “We come from a middle class family. If the price of salt goes up it will not affect us. If the bus fares goes up it will not affect us because we travel by car”, or “People living in Kathmandu represent the middle class [ . . . ] They can’t do work such as mopping, cleaning the house, washing dishes. Actually, they are not able to do these things. They never think of this kind of work”. These women may not be seen as representative of Nepali women, who in much academic and development discourse have been represented as a homogenous category of disempowered, oppressed subjects (Tamang 2002). As elsewhere in South Asia, high caste Nepali Hindu women have been portrayed as passive, submissive to male authority, and subject to Brahmanic ideals of purity, obedience, and honour (Bennett 1983, Fruzzetti 1982). This image has been countered by studies that emphasize the multi-vocal and contested character of dominant gender ideologies (Skinner and Holland 1998, Cameron 1998, Tamang 2002). Without ignoring the existence of widespread structural discrimination against women in Nepal,<sup>3</sup> it is critical to acknowledge that there are no uniform gender roles, and therefore it is crucial to analyse women’s mobilities in the context of the multiple patriarchies and gendered norms, informed by class, caste, ethnicity, and religion, which co-exist in society (Tamang 2002). The participants in this study represent an expanding, distinctly ‘classed’ category of women in Nepal, whose expectations of personal freedom were partly formed by the People’s Movement in 1990 (Liechty 1996), and since then have increasingly entered the public sphere through their engagement with education and professional life. The cases included in this article illustrate narrate constructions of women’s mobilities, and more specifically, how migration and study abroad have influenced the way in which a particular category of women perceive themselves, and negotiate their position in the family and wider Nepali society. Although related questions of gendered middle-class mobilities

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<sup>3</sup> Despite recent improvements to key parameters of human development, such as life expectancy, maternal mortality, and literacy rate, historically institutionalized gender disparities persist in Nepal. For example, see Asian Development Bank (2010) or Nepal Human Development Report 2014 (2014).

have been subject to anthropological inquiry elsewhere in South Asia (e.g. Bhatt 2015, Radhakrishnan 2011), this perspective has remained relatively unexplored in the context of Nepal.

One of the authors, Dhungel, an educated, urban, high caste woman who went abroad for her doctoral studies, shares biographical experiences with many of the study participants, and has used this reflexively in the research process to shed light on the dilemmas experienced by many educated, middle- and upper class women. As a daughter of a Bahun (Nepali Brahmin) family, she grew up in the hills of Nepal in the 1990s, and from early childhood felt the restrictions, surveillance, and the expectations of girls as compared to boys, expressed by her family with regard to her whereabouts and domestic duties. At the same time, she was encouraged to study, not only by her parents, but also by her husband and parents-in-law, who supported her progress in higher education, and eventually, a doctorate. This created an opportunity to study in Denmark and, thus, experience exposure to a broader world. Similar to many of the informants, this led her to reflect on her position as an educated woman in contemporary Nepal, driven by the ambition to establish a professional career, yet constrained by the expectations of her as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and daughter. To a large extent Dhungel's own experiences mirror those of her informants, and illustrate how gender operates simultaneously at different geographical and social scales in processes of mobility (cf. Pessar and Mahler 2003). This will be elaborated in the following section, the aim of which is to link the broader patterns of Nepali migrations to women's mobility practices as these are framed by dominant gender roles, and thereby to provide a context for understanding the experiences of the female returnees.

### **Migration and gendered mobilities in Nepali society**

The scholarly literature on migration in Nepal, documenting the role of geographical mobility in the lives of many Nepali people, is substantial, with regard to different types of migration, the scale of migration, the motivations behind it, and its impact on both household and national economies (e.g. the edited volumes by Bruslé 2009/10, Subba and Sinha 2016). Despite the variety of studies on Nepali migration, not much attention has been paid to gender and female mobilities, partly because

most Nepali migrants are male.<sup>4</sup> Generally, it is accurate to claim that Nepali migration has been, and still is, a predominantly male practice, which has been integral to the livelihood of many households in Nepal, partly as a means to subsidize household economies (Graner 2009/2010, Kollmair et al., 2006), and partly as a rite of passage central to the transition to adulthood of young men (Sharma 2008). Historically speaking, India has been the primary destination for Nepali migrants, partly because of the open borders between the two countries, and partly because it is a financially accessible destination for the poor (Thieme 2006). With few exceptions (e.g. Kasper 2005; Thieme and Müller-Böcker 2009/2010), women have been fairly invisible in academic discussions of Nepal-India migration, but have not been completely absent in migration practices. Some have followed male relatives and entered various forms of employment in India – military, domestic, agricultural – others have left on their own or have been trafficked as sex workers or forced labourers (UNIFEM and NIDS 2006). The number of Nepalis living outside Nepal more than doubled between 2001 and 2011 (Sharma et al. 2014: 32), and a range of destinations in the Middle East, South East Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia provided new paths to Nepalis wishing to leave the country (e.g. Kern and Böker-Müller 2015, Sharma 2013, Valentin 2015, Yamanaka 2005). This contributed to an increasing feminization of Nepali migration, and to the shaping of new, gendered mobility trajectories. Whereas the demand for migrant labour in the Middle East has attracted women from lower social strata,<sup>5</sup> the organized migration of nurses has provided educated women with a socially recognized path for independent migration since the early 2000s, and has turned Nepal into

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<sup>4</sup> Based on data on the 'absentee population' drawn from national-level surveys conducted over the last decade, it is estimated that about one-fifth of the Nepalese population is absent from their homes, and that within this group, men outnumber women by a ratio of nearly three to one (Sharma et al. 2014, 10). These figures do not reveal a distinction between internal and international migrants, but the relative proportion of female migrants going abroad is significantly lower than that of males, namely 12 to 100 (Sharma et al. 2014, 34).

<sup>5</sup> In 1999, female labour migration from Nepal to the Middle East was officially banned for women under the age of 30, due to the risk of physical and sexual abuse (Ministry of Labour and Employment 2014, 21), but this unintentionally led to a flow of illegal female migration via India. The ban was lifted in 2010, but re-instated in 2012.

a ‘nurse-exporting’ nation (Adhikari 2009/2010). Over the last two decades an increasing number of young Nepalis have been attracted by the opportunity for an education abroad – preferably in the US, Europe, or Australia – presented by the expanding, commercialized, global education market (Ghimire and Maharjan 2015; Valentin 2012). Student migration attracts both young men and women, is a distinctly middle-class phenomenon linked to the privilege of being able to purchase a higher education abroad (Valentin 2015), and as such, is embedded in specific class and gender-based ideas of mobility, which contribute to shape women’s geographical and social trajectories.

The way in which migration practices are embedded in the social fabric of a predominantly patriarchal society, and how rules of post-marital residence determine differences in males’ and females’ mobility, are compelling questions. In Nepal, as in other Hindu-based South Asian societies where virilocal residential practices predominate, marriage entails the geographical movement of young women from one patrilineal household to another (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008). This means that when a woman marries, she moves from her father’s home to her husband’s, and to varying degrees continues to be subject to a social policing by families and the wider community (Brunson 2014). However, dominant gender roles and responsibilities are changing, with more young couples setting up nuclear families, and more Nepali women entering the public sphere through their involvement in educational and professional life. Although this inevitably contributes to women’s expanding geographical and social circles, it also fosters a set of competing expectations of middle-class women, by themselves and by others. To capture the tensions between women’s potential to have professional careers, and their family duties, situated in the domestic sphere, Smitha Radhakrishnan (2011) proposes the concept of a ‘respectable femininity’ in her work on gender and class among transnational Indian IT professionals in the early 00s. The subtle balance between an ‘Indian’ domestic life and a ‘global’ professional life that middle-class women must learn to strike is critical to this (*ibid.*). As the following cases will reveal, this balance is equally relevant to middle-class Nepali women who have been exposed to competing ideologies of womanhood and gender-based restrictions during their studies abroad.

### **Pushing the boundaries and negotiating a position**

As indicated above, it is not uncommon for middle-class Nepali women to continue into higher education, sometimes abroad, often encouraged by their parents. Yet, many young women still express concerns about their family's protection and surveillance, which are closely linked to dominant ideas of respectability (*ijjat*) central to middle-class formation (Liechty 1996, 2003). The following examples draw on interviews with highly skilled Nepali female returnees, and reveal the various ways in which this impacts their self-understanding upon return. The examples present both personally-experienced restrictions and the structural barriers women in Nepal face, as articulated by returnees.

Preeti, a Nepali returnee from the US, is a young woman who struggled to strike a balance between family expectations and her own need to expand her personal and social circles. She completed her 12<sup>th</sup> year at a prestigious high school in Kathmandu, and afterwards, in her own words, the only thing she wanted was to get out of Nepal. Her father, a banker, wanted her to study medicine, but she was not keen on pursuing an education in the sciences, and did not find the academic environment in Nepal conducive to creative thinking. With the help of some friends in the US, in 2005 she was awarded a scholarship for a bachelor's programme in liberal arts in the US, which included a short stay as an exchange student in Denmark. In 2010, Preeti returned to Nepal, where she opened a coffee shop. She was, she said, an 'experimental, exploring person' who wanted to try things before she continued her studies. During her stay in the US she never questioned that she would return to Nepal, yet at the time of the interview in 2012 she was looking for opportunities to enter a master's programme abroad. Her reflections below accurately reflect the generally felt experiences of being a young woman from an upper-middle class family, where expectations of her professional capabilities were high, but where there was little confidence in her capacity as an independent woman:

So being a Nepali girl especially, it's kind of really difficult because you are always sheltered, protected and I mean, no matter [...] some listen to that kind of expectation. You like feel, oh how am I gonna make it? You always have that and especially in my family, no matter how liberal they were, they were still conservative in the

sense like you shouldn't go out too late. I wasn't allowed to stay over at my friend's place and from that shift to going to the States, that was completely crazy. Freedom you know, do whatever you want. There is no one to scold you like [...] you make your own values, all those values which impeded on you.<sup>6</sup>

Later in the interview she pondered how her stay in the US and Denmark had changed her attitude, and made her re-evaluate her position in the family:

... I started going on my own [...]. I guess how I dealt with this is balancing it out. I know my boundaries but at the same time I am not limited by the boundaries. I do a little bit, push them a little bit and see if they [her parents] can take it? You know and then I am very tactful about when and how to push those boundaries. Because in any other circumstances my parents will be ok with me, but coming up with a coffee shop, they were like.... you know.... there was a strong resistance against it from home. They were like oh you come from the States and you have all these amazing degrees and then all you want to be is waiter?

Preeti's representation of her parents' reaction to her career path reveals a tension regarding ideas of respectability. What she considered a business venture was to them a low status job that did not correspond to the status ascribed to an educated returnee from the US. Preeti clearly had problems readjusting to her home, with regard to both her need for personal space and her career choice, and like the Indian women referred to by Radhakrisnan (2011), she framed it in terms of a 'balance'. She was conscious of the boundaries set by her parents, and strategically handled them in a way that allowed her some room, without compromising them too much.

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<sup>6</sup> This interview was conducted in English by Valentin, whereas the rest of the interviews were conducted by Dhungel in Nepali. In the latter material, asterisks (\*) are used to indicate English phrases used by interviewees themselves. In the translations we have deliberately tried to maintain the colloquial tone, to accurately convey the original character of the interviews.

Another example of someone who was struggling to balance the expectations others had of her was Maya, also a returnee from the US. She grew up in Kathmandu, where she attended a private school with a good reputation, and at the age of 17 she received a scholarship to go to the US. Having obtained bachelor's and master's degrees in gender studies, she returned to Nepal ten years later, in 2012. During her stay in the US Maya had a three-year affair with a Nepali man, whom she eventually married. The match was controversial because he as a Bahun (Nepal Brahmin) was of a higher caste than Maya, who was a Newar (the ethnic group originally inhabiting the Kathmandu Valley). For this reason her mother did not welcome the relationship, but to Maya's surprise her father acknowledged that it was her own decision, and he accepted it. Maya was expected to move to her in-laws' home after marriage, but they lived 'far away', and therefore she and her husband stayed in her natal home after marriage. She explicitly recognized that her academic background in gender studies made her see things in a new light. Reflecting on some of the challenges she found on her return to Nepal she said,

When we look at the division of labour in the household, there is also another challenge because of the society. We were talking about it yesterday. It is not only my husband's fault, society has placed things in his brain so that he doesn't have to think. It's the same case with my brother. It is my sister who looks after everything at home. It just doesn't come to his mind that I [referring to himself] have to look at these things [domestic work] too.

... They are in their own world and that's it. This has been one of the biggest challenges after coming back. Even people like me who are educated and speak for themselves are tied to these gender roles. What will happen to those people who are not educated?

Laxmi: Yes, when girls stay at home...

Maya: Yes, it has so much to do with expectations. When my mother-in-law comes, she behaves differently towards me and my oldest sister-in-law. This is because of the inter-caste [marriage],

and because I am educated and also work. But then it is expected that I cook for the family when I am back from the office. These things are always there. I have to take my mother-in-law to the temple and things like that.

Laxmi: Yes, husbands can also do that, isn't it?

Maya: Even if I am not told directly that I have to do this there is an expectation that you do it...

Occasionally, Maya's mother-in-law would come to Kathmandu and stay with Maya's husband's brother. During these periods Maya would also have to stay there, and clearly felt the constraints of being a daughter-in-law in a family that was strict in its observance of gender- and caste-based restrictions. For example, she was expected to wear a sari in front of her mother-in-law, and not a skirt or jeans, although that was acceptable in her natal home. However, like Preeti, Maya did not always comply with the expected behaviour and sometimes insisted on wearing clothes of her own choosing. In both supporting her and asking her to obey her mother-in-law, her husband was, in Maya's interpretation, somewhat split. In the US they usually shared all work, from going to the grocery store to managing the home and helping Maya in her assignments, but in Nepal she did not expect this kind of help from him, as the contexts of the US and Nepal, he would claim, were different. Given the fact that Maya had studied gender, and in many ways reflected critically on her position as a woman, it is noteworthy that upon return she accepted the subjection to the patriarchal gender patterns that she so strongly opposed.

Whereas Preeti and Maya referred to their personal experiences of confinement, other informants emphasized that they had not been subjected to such restrictions, but spoke of gender discrimination at a more general level. Or, as phrased by one returnee: 'We have a notion that daughters are for others and they are treated as second class citizens. We take this kind of discrimination as an evident thing'. The statement that 'daughters are for others' refers to prevailing idea in Hindu households that daughters will be given away to other families through marriage, and therefore are only temporarily in their natal



homes. This hints at the structural discrimination against women and girls in Nepali society to which many of the informants, including Suda, referred.

Suda returned from the Netherlands after earning her master's degree in engineering in 2010. She grew up in a family as the only daughter, but unlike many other Nepali girls, she never had to carry out household activities, and learned to manage a home only later. At the time of the interview she had a full-time job in an engineering company, and like many other working mothers she had to find a balance between her family and work life. In response to the question of the challenges that she faced in the progression of her career, she emphasized the structural barriers encountered by women:

[I]n all contexts, it is male-dominated. When you look at it, how many women are at the decision making level in any office? When you look at it, generally there are women at the officer levels, and there are so many hindrances reaching the managerial level. There will be meetings, meetings late in the evening. Only men attend such meetings. Women are always wondering, 'What will my family say?' They lag behind. When it happens often, then they become distant. Men have a circle, a different one, and we can't even go out like that, can we?

Responding to the question of the difficulties that female returnees in particular would encounter, Suda noted:

[W]hen they return with their Master's, there are two main issues. They have to move their career and their private life forward at the same time. So which one will you choose? If you move your career forward, then you are aging, and it will get late to get married. And then if you get married at that time, then your friend who was at the same point until then will surpass you and be way ahead. Then you are still way behind. That is one of the major challenges because when you come back after finishing your Master's, you have already aged (*aaye pachi \*age\* bhaisaka ko huncha*). They are twenty-six, twenty-seven years, even in my case, I said that unless I get a good job, I won't marry, and I had a late marriage. When we

are talking from a Nepali perspective, it is quite late to marry when one is twenty-nine, thirty years old, isn't it? This is still this challenge. If one says, I will get married and take a job later, most of them will not be able to find a job and they stay at home.

Although the tension between family and career is certainly not unique to either Nepali middle-class women, or to highly skilled returnee migrants, in many cases prolonged stays abroad do conflict with parental and societal demands for a 'timely' marriage. This issue was also raised by Kangana, who was the first in her family to study abroad, and who, after nine years in the US, at the age of thirty-one, faced similar challenges. One of the main reasons for her to return was her family, especially her 90-year-old grandmother, whom she wanted to spend time with before it was too late. Kangana was ambivalent in her view of Nepali society, both with regard to the caste system and marriage pressures

There are so many things that I don't like about my society but there are [also] so many things that I don't like about the US society. I think the ideal is somewhere in between. I hate this caste system (*jat bhat*). The way they treat helpers, I don't like that. If someone touches food, then one can eat and if someone else touches food, then one can't eat. Everyone is more concerned about what the other's daughter is doing rather than what their own daughter is doing . . .

Laxmi: You also mentioned the marriage pressure?

Kangana: Yea, there is lot of that too. I am almost thirty-one now. So some of my cousins say either you get married to a divorcee or you get married to a non-Nepali.

Similarly, Binita's case illustrates the relationship between personal experiences of constraint as a young woman and a quest for autonomy, explained with reference to her exposure to a world outside Nepal. Binita spent much of her childhood in the US, where her father earned his PhD, and in her own words, had been raised to be critical. When she

was 13 they returned to Nepal and stayed there until a few years later, when her father got a job in the UK. She accompanied her parents and earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree there. In 2009 she returned to Nepal, got a job and met what turned out to be her future husband at her workplace. She returned to the UK when he was offered a scholarship for a one-year graduate's programme there. In 2012 they both returned to Nepal. When discussing her marriage, she said that she would have preferred not to marry, but just live together as a couple. However, her husband could not cope with that idea, because, she thought, he always obeyed his seniors. Attributing such attitudes to his upbringing in Nepal, Binita said,

I sometimes compare myself with my husband. He was educated here [Kathmandu], even though he studied in his rural village and then came to Kathmandu later to study. He doesn't say \*no\* to anyone and doesn't even \*question\* anyone. He will do everything a person above him (*thulo manche*) tells him to. This is \*culturally\* so \*ingrained\* that he thinks that if a person in such a position has said something, then he thinks it will be the right (*thikai*) thing.

Binita appreciated her husband's support, but emphasized that before marrying she set out some conditions to him.

I will never touch another's feet [for blessings as prescribed by Hindu tradition] because I think no one's head should touch another's feet.

...

There is also the tradition that daughters-in-law are not allowed to sit on the sofa, but on the floor. My brother married one year ago, and I observed the whole process from the beginning to the end. So I interrupted many times and said that I will not do this and that. My in-laws live in the village, so I don't have to stay with them. I have my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, they live at Dhapasi, but we don't live together. We had a separate flat. It is not that I don't like them, but I am so used to being independent, it's so difficult. There are so many people, so there's always the confusion for

whom should I cook, can't cook just for myself. I have the habit of doing things my way, and it is so difficult to do things in another environment.

Laxmi: We don't have habit of doing what others say, so it's better than to stay and be humiliated.

Binita: That's also right and it's also like that. They don't understand my perspective. Another tension is that as I am the youngest daughter-in-law, I always feared that they will over-rule me. That's why I said that I won't do these things.

Practices such as bowing the head and not sitting on the sofa, expressed in an implicit contrast to sitting on the floor, refer to the expected behaviours of a daughter-in-law in many Hindu households. Binita explicitly condemned these practices, which she found discriminatory, but complied with other, in her view, less-controversial practices such as wearing a necklace (*pote*) and putting a mark (*tika*) in her forehead, both of which signify her status as a married woman, whenever she had to go the village.

Gender-based restrictions are not necessarily given up, but often modified in the processes of migration (Sharma 2013). Upon their return to Nepal, women have to reposition themselves in gendered hierarchies, and reconsider how to deal with such restrictions in a society that, from their perspective, has not changed since they left. As the examples in this section have illustrated, many of these women struggle to come to terms with the position they are expected to fill in the domestic sphere, and in various ways try to oppose this, while pragmatically working out ways to cope with it. In the interviews, this opposition was framed within a broader critique of the position of women in Nepali society, and evaluated in light of the experiences gained abroad, especially having worked and studied in new environments.

### **Redefining womanhood: 'being free' and 'speaking up'**

The notions of personal freedom (*byakdigat swatantra*) and confidence (*atmabhiswas*), and the related ideas of being outspoken (*bolni bini*) and critical (*samalochana*), were recurrent themes in the interviews. These

terms were used to describe a set of interrelated qualities seen to have been adopted during a stay abroad and often contrasted with what was found in Nepal. Furthermore, these qualities were often discussed in relation to educational and professional careers, but as is clear from the following examples, these patterns had ramifications in the domestic sphere, and had an impact on the way in which the women saw themselves within gender and generational hierarchies in general.

That independence and personal freedom were considered important yet unintended outcomes of a stay abroad was echoed in many interviews. The interviews revealed several different, yet overlapping interpretations of independence, such as access to decision-making processes, a capacity to be economically self-reliant, and the freedom to dress, behave, and move according to one's own preferences. Many linked this to the particularly 'Western' lifestyle encountered in North America, Europe, and Australia, which were perceived as spaces for individuality (cf. Radhakrishnan 2011). However, examples of women who had studied in India suggest that the acquisition of such qualities may have as much to do with being away from home as with the location itself. Asha is an example of a Nepali returnee who studied at a well-respected university in India. Like others, she emphasized how the experience of being abroad had taught her to stand on her own two feet, and to cope with unfamiliar situations:

When I was living there, it was not only my studies, academic learning, but I learned about my independence, my creativity, and how to take care of myself. I was the only daughter of my parents, and I was pampered a lot here. I was like that until grade seven. If my mummy would feed me with her hands, then I would eat, but when I went abroad I learned that I have to do my own work, I have to protect myself, choose my own friends, from whom I should maintain a certain distance. I learnt all these life skills (*tyo sabai \*life\* ko \*skills\**) ... Plus India is a vast country. In such a country, I learned to deal with others, from auto-rickshaw drivers to shopkeepers, isn't it? I remember an incident, me and my friend were going to the ATM You know, Delhi is dangerous for girls. When we were going there, some boys came and asked 'are you guys from Manipur?' 'How much for a night?' We wore clothes like these, fully

covered. Then we learned how to tackle such things, we have learned such things too.

That the outcome of a study abroad was not measured only in terms of academic achievement, but also in terms of exposure to new social environments was equally relevant to Dikshya, and supports the observations made by Ghimire and Maharjan (2015) concerning the importance of the implicit knowledge acquired during the processes of student migration. Dikshya earned her bachelor's degree in the US, and stayed there for work for a year and a half after her studies were complete. Although she missed her family a lot, in her own words, it was 'one of the best experiences in [her] life'. She would have liked to stay on, but could not extend her work permit. She returned to Nepal, but continued to collaborate with the American company where she had worked. She reflected on the experience that she had gained from studying at an international college in a relatively isolated area of the US, with students from sixteen different countries, as a daughter far from her family in Nepal. This had contributed to developing her personality:

The level of experience, quality of education, professors, it opened a completely new world for me. If I had done my +2 [referring to high school] or bachelor [in Nepal], I can't even imagine who I would have been. Because who I am right now, the Dikshya that I know, has been created because of that. When you go there, you meet people from places that you have never heard of before. Then you become friends, live there, and study there, take part in every activity, then you get to know them...

Like several other informants, Maya (introduced in the previous section) emphasized how her stay abroad had encouraged her to speak up in public and to question things going on around her, in both her professional and private life. Although this was appreciated at the college she attended in the US, it created tensions when she had to accommodate to her home and workplace in Nepal.

I went abroad when I was seventeen. It was the time to shape my personality. That's why it was already ingrained. I remember when I returned for the first time after two years, at that time I had started questioning things. That is, why are things like this, like that? My mother scolded me for asking so many questions. I was so surprised because when I went there from Nepal, I was taught to question things, to understand why things are the way they are. I was taught to question things in order to learn about them. When I came here [Nepal], I was told not to ask many questions and to accept what is already there.

A few weeks after her return to Nepal, Maya started to work as a programme coordinator at an organization targeting oppressed people. She found the work interesting, but did not like the work environment. On the one hand her colleagues respected her for her foreign degree, but they also found her too outspoken and confrontational. Speaking about the relationship between her and a male advocacy coordinator, her senior in age, but working below her, she said:

He also thought that he knew everything. When I told him to do these things and those things, he usually didn't do it. At staff meetings, he would directly oppose me and, in a sense, he wouldn't do the things that I told him to do. I was so surprised that I thought if you don't like what I am doing, you should bring ideas and I will follow them. Then he will not put any ideas on table. So in the meetings in front of all the staff, he would talk disrespectfully to me and oppose me.

Maya reported other cases where she felt she was not acknowledged for her skills, and explicitly linked this to her status as a relatively junior woman.

The idea that migration would lead to a change in personality figured strongly in the interview with Nitu, where she recalled how difficult it had been for both her and daughter to return to Nepal after two years in Norway. She contrasted the apparent disorder of Kathmandu – the pollution, the market places, and the traffic – with the order of Norwegian society, and told of how the return had affected her

both physically and mentally. This was further complicated by the ongoing armed conflict, which made her feel insecure there. Even then, she never considered settling down in Norway, mostly because of family obligations, but also because she assumed it would be difficult to get a job in Norway that would match her qualifications. Yet the stay had made her think, and observe things in a different way, and thus situated her position as a woman in a new perspective. Central to this was the courage to speak up.

Women there [Norway] are very much forward. If you look, it seems that men are mute (*lato*) and women are more talkative (*patar patar*) than us. But with us, when we experience it ourselves and get education from there, then even if we don't talk that much (do *patar patar*), we have to speak, but it doesn't mean that we will get everything just by speaking out. But we have to be able to do analysis, have skills to decide if it is ok to speak or not because if one doesn't have that and then speaks out, that person will have to bear its consequences. It is not that women have to tolerate everything. We have to speak, but also know how to speak. If one doesn't know about it, one must not speak.

A recurrent, related theme in the interviews was that of self-confidence (*atmabhiswas*). Self-confidence was seen as a product of the need to make decisions, to handle various challenges on one's own, and to engage in what were considered less hierarchical relations between students and professors while abroad. Sushma, who studied in the UK, recalled how, during an orientation course at the British Council prior to departure, she and other participants were told to not be afraid to make appointments, and 'not to be like mice, but like lions', once they got to the UK. She further commented on the self-confidence she had developed and again this was linked to the courage to speak up:

I had this habit that even if someone said something, I would just keep quiet, but we shouldn't keep quiet, now I think we must say what we think ... Even if some people say something to me in front of others, I should not just keep quiet. I need to say what I know and things that others don't know ... Even in my personal life, I learned



that confidence builds up. We must work hard, we must do what we can from our position. I feel that there have been lots of changes, changes in my personality. Others also said that I have become different, before and after. My relatives and others said so ... They said when people return from abroad or come back from their studies from abroad, they have changed a lot. They said that '*manche arko hudo raicha*' (referring to personal change). Their nose, mouth, ear are all the same, but what it means is that their thinking, ways of expressions all differs. Their behaviour changes.

However, irrespective of the personal changes that many of the women had undergone, they had to juggle family and work obligations, and readjust to an environment that in their view had not changed significantly. This was also the case for Sushma, who emphasized the double responsibilities that she had, as an educated woman employed full-time at a government bank, and her concerns about her husband's reaction to her occasional late returns from the office.

As the cases above reveal, the women quite explicitly linked what they perceived of as a change in personality with the related experience of being away from the family home, going abroad and getting a university degree. Learning to become critical and vocal was generally explained as a result of encounters with pedagogies different from those previously experienced in Nepal, and with learning spaces characterized by less pronounced gender and generational hierarchies. Given that most of the informants had been to the US, Europe, or Australia, the idea of an empowered, free, 'Western' woman figured as both a contrast against which they defined themselves, and as an ideal towards which they strived, at least partially. However, the few examples of women who had returned to Nepal from India gave evidence of an equally important dimension for personal transformation, namely, being exposed to, and learning to navigate new social and physical environments (Valentin 2015), which in a longer perspective made the women reconsider and question their position in Nepali society.

## **Conclusion**

This article focuses on highly educated Nepali women who have returned from longer stays abroad, and examined how women's

experiences of return contribute to shaping ideas of what it means to be and act as a woman in contemporary Nepal (cf. Bhatt 2015). This article sheds light on the relationship between migration practices and changing gendered trajectories and has shown, first, how migration for an education abroad is an outcome of expectations of middle-class women and their potential for a professional career, and how such migration fosters a greater demand for autonomy (cf. Afsar 2011). Current forms of transnational Nepali migration are both extensions and negotiations of already-existing gendered mobility practices. Dominant ideas of middle-class female mobility continue to inform the way in which women simultaneously inhabit multiple locations in processes of transnational migration, whether it is considered 'abroad' or 'at home'. The quest for increased autonomy challenges both prevailing practices of class and gender-based restrictions, and related to this, ideas of respectability, which is experienced by many women as a tension between professional ambitions and domestic duties as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. As the empirical cases have shown, women do not passively obey all restrictions, but find subtle ways to oppose these, and to balance what may sometimes be considered conflicting expectations. Secondly, this article acknowledges that migration entails projects of transformation (Gardner and Osella 2003: xxii) and brings insight into the ways in which highly educated female returnees link their exposure to new ideas of womanhood with changes in their self-understanding as women in present-day Nepal. In doing so, they draw on a set of concepts that in various ways emphasize potential for empowerment. They return to Nepal and see it from their own perspective as persons different to those who left, and who find a legitimate position in a society that has not remained static, yet is still perceived as constraining in many ways.

This brings us to a concluding note on return migration and its potential as a contributing factor for social change in Nepal. Do these highly educated women carry with them a set of values, ideas, and practices, often conceptualized as 'social remittances' (Levitt 2001), which, as Ghimire and Maharjan (2015) suggest, may be translated into and used as skills in Nepal? It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a causal link between social remittances and social change based on our material. What this study underscores is the need to move beyond

instrumental understandings of return, and instead to look at the ways in which people perceive themselves and their changing positions in society as parts of larger projects of individual and societal transformation.

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# Migration governance in the context of Nepal's labour migration to the Gulf countries

Uddhab Pyakurel

## Context

Migration for work or labour is a phenomenon with domestic and international dimensions in Nepal. Traditionally, most migration took place within the country's borders, with some people going to India and Tibet (Sharma *et al.* 2014) for work and trading. However, this historical trend has changed in recent years, due to internal conflicts generated by the Maoist insurgency which began in 1996, the decline of Nepal's carpet industry (Bohra & Massey 2009: 623), and other factors. Recent data show that an average of 1,689 Nepalese get approval for foreign employment on a daily basis. The number of people who migrate abroad for labour is increasing significantly, and many aspiring youths are waiting for opportunities to join the labour market.

The long waiting period for new passport applications provides further insight into the future scenario of labour migration in Nepal. According to the Department of Passports, an average of 4,000 passports are currently issued daily along with around 2,000 priority passports that are applied for directly in Kathmandu.<sup>1</sup> Many agencies and authorities are involved in managing the migration regime in Nepal. These organisations claim that they are working hard to make foreign labour migration as safe as possible by easing the process within the country. But migrant workers, particularly those in lower wage industries, often encounter exploitative behaviour,<sup>2</sup> not only in Nepal

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<sup>1</sup> See more at:

[http://www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news\\_details&news\\_id=70236#sthash.QVjRyaHr.dpuf](http://www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=70236#sthash.QVjRyaHr.dpuf), accessed on November 16, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Workers report exploitative working conditions, extreme forms of abuse, including abuse that resulted in permanent injury and death in destination countries, and on the other hand workers face the lingering of officials, non-cooperation and misinformation by officials resulting in a costly mechanism to obtain permission to leave Nepal.

but also in the work place abroad.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Nepalese migrants are faced with increasing vulnerability and exploitation in many countries. A study conducted by The Asia Foundation and colleagues in 2013,<sup>4</sup> shows that more than 69 percent of returnee migrants stated that they encountered problems during their period of employment abroad. Against this background, this paper tries to recount the perceptions of migrants, returnees and aspirants of the process of migration and the governance of labour migration in Nepal. The whole process of migration and the involvement of the government and other agencies, as well as migration laws, rules and policies are often referred to as migration governance. This paper engages with the current global discussion and literature on migration management and migration governance and assesses how this involvement is perceived by labour migrants and those who aspire to work abroad as labourers. Since there has been a significant increase of labour migration to the Gulf States over recent years, the focus of the discussion is on Nepalese labour migrants and those Nepalese who aspire to work abroad as labourers in the Gulf countries.

Data were collected from December 2013 to May 2014. In-depth interviews were conducted with labourers who aspire to work in the Gulf and migrant labourers already working in the Gulf, who were present in Nepal for holidays during the research period. To collect primary data, key interviews were also conducted with policy makers, i.e. former ministers, former secretaries and serving secretaries of the concerned ministries; senior officers of implementing agencies, especially government officers of the passport department, labour

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<sup>3</sup>According to the Department of Labour, it received 1484 foreign employment complains within the last six months starting from July-August 2014. These complains mainly consist of money/financial fraud, with around 379.7 million Nepalese Rupees taken by manpower agencies and individual agents promising to send aspirant youths into foreign employment. But this amount is most likely too small and unrepresentative, as the majority of sufferers do not follow such mechanisms due to various reasons. The lack of proper information about the available mechanisms, and the perception that people cannot be given justice even if they try (Paoletti *et al.* 2014) are the main two reasons that the available mechanisms are not made use of.

<sup>4</sup>For details, see Labour Migration Trends and Patterns: Bangladesh, India and Nepal 2013, a Study Report by the Asia Foundation, The Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit-Bangladesh, Center for the Research on Environment Health and Population Activities-Nepal, and Center for Operations Research and Training-India, 2013.



department and immigration department; and individuals from manpower agencies. Government policies, laws, rules, regulations, journal articles, books, book chapters, papers, reports, etc., were reviewed and used as secondary sources of data.

### **The governance debate in migration studies**

Broadly speaking, the term governance concerns the exercise of authority within a particular sphere (Pierre and Peters 2000). The concept travelled a long way from poetry (Bevir 2008) to public administration (Frederickson 2005) and has now become a concept that 'can be used to describe any pattern of rule that arises either when the state is dependent upon others or when the state play little or no role' (Bevir 2008:3). The concept of governance has been regularly used in migration studies. However, the term migration governance has only been discussed in analyses of the governance of migration on a global level. It has been argued that in discussions of migration, the very concept of migration governance has neglected the role of the state as a primary agent, as if the concept had no relation to the national level. That is why scholars like Betts state that "despite the emergence of a debate on the global governance of migration, the issue remains poorly understood within both academia and policy circles" (2011:3). Scholars also use the phrases "migration governance" and "migration management" interchangeably; some scholars describe the need for a global policy under the name "global migration governance", while others refer to "international migration management." But there have been "almost no attempts to understand what migration management refers to" (Geiger and Pecoud 2010: 1).<sup>5</sup> When scholars focus only on destination countries whilst discussing the management or governance of labour migration, often the question arises whether Western policy-making circles are motivated by the consideration that migration needs to be managed.<sup>6</sup> Also, the global discussion of these themes often

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<sup>5</sup>They also state that most of the burgeoning literature is of an advocacy sort and is more prescriptive than descriptive.

<sup>6</sup>For example, Laubenthal (2012), Quirico (2012), Devitt (2012) and Salis (2012) refer to labour migration policy and the recent reorientation of labour migration management that combines both the law and the administration of labour migration in Germany, Sweden, UK and Italy. Likewise, the articles which were published under the LAB-MIG-

neglects the phenomenon of South to South migration,<sup>7</sup> by assuming that labour migration only occurs from South to North.

As Mark Bevir (2008) mentions in his recent book, the term governance refers to all processes of governing, whether undertaken by governments, markets or networks over a family, tribe, formal or informal organisation or territory through laws, norms, power or language. If one tries to fit this definition into the governance of Nepal's labour migration, in order to materialise, facilitate or control labour migration, governance should include the processes undertaken by the Government of Nepal through its various departments and units, the mechanism adopted by manpower agencies and their agents, the ethics of the advertising agents and media, and the norms and values of families and relatives of the aspirant labourers who want to go abroad.

### **Migration governance in the context of Nepal's labour migration to the Gulf countries**

Generally speaking, the process of Nepal's labour migration to the Gulf countries starts with a company from the host country that issues a letter of demand mentioning a need for specific types of worker(s) for the day-to-day functioning of the company. The letter of demand has to undergo proper investigation by the umbrella organisations of trade, commerce and industry of the country before getting official approval. The company's strength and capability to hire foreign workers should be the primary concern of the umbrella body before approving the demand. The approved demand is then presented to the Nepalese Embassy in the particular destination country. The Embassy investigates whether the demand is genuine, and if so, it is forwarded to a relevant

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GOV Project entitled 'Labour Migration Governance in Contemporary Europe' included no case of the emigration regime in the country of origin while discussing migration governance.

<sup>7</sup>The data state that only a quarter of international migrants go from the global South (non-OECD countries) to the global North (OECD countries), while not quite two-thirds of migrants move within the global South. This reflects the reality of globalisation as an uneven process with poles of development within the South promoting migration. Certainly, media attention is focused almost entirely on the 16% of migrants who move across the South giving a quite unbalanced feeling to the resultant understanding of migration as a global process. (For details, see Munck 2013: 3).

manpower agency in Nepal. Then the recruitment process starts: the manpower agency seeks the permission of the Department of Foreign Employment for pre-approval. After the Department has checked the essential documents,<sup>8</sup> it can allow the manpower agency to advertise. In response to the advertisement, aspirant workers apply for the available posts, and interviews and other tests may be conducted to select eligible candidates. After being selected, a candidate has to go for a medical check in a government-authorized medical agency. Along with a positive medical report, the visa application process will begin. This process varies from country to country, i.e. some countries have a visa stamp system, whereas some others have a paper visa system. Recruiting agencies in Nepal will apply for a visa through the respective embassies, but employing companies have to take up the visa process from the receiving country. After receiving the visa, the selected candidate needs to go through an orientation session which should run for a minimum of 12 hours and is offered by a government-authorized orientation centre, in order to learn about the nature of the work, the rules of the company, the climate, religion, traffic, government rules and regulations, etc., of the destination country. The recruiting agency books a flight for the candidate, buys insurance and seeks final labour approval from the Department of Labour for departure.

However, most of the respondents of this study, who are migrant labourers working in the Gulf countries, and aspirant workers who are in the process of going abroad, have different perceptions of this process and the migration-related structural arrangements that are available in the country. They say, "Laws, rules, regulations and policies are an attempt of the elite to save face before the people ...*Nepal ma broker harule milaune ho jasariyani...* (it is mostly the brokers who manage

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<sup>8</sup>Essential documents are: a) Demand Letter (attested from the Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Nepal Embassy); b) Power of Attorney (attested from the Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Nepal Embassy); c) Interparty Agreement or Agency Agreement (service agreement between employing company and recruitment agency in Nepal which should be attested from the Chamber of Commerce of the receiving country and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Nepal Embassy); d) Sample Job Offer; e) Guarantee Letter to assure that the employing company should not transfer any workers to another country without approval of competent Nepal Government authorities; f) Visa Approval/wakala/NOC/Authorization.

things by hook or crook in Nepal).” When asked about the meaning of *jasaripani*, Kedar,<sup>9</sup> who has been working in Qatar for the past fifteen years, said,

*Nepal ma jasari vaneko ta bujnu paryoni ... under table ... fake documentation* (You should understand the term *jasari pani* to mean dealing under the table (bribe), and duplicating or faking documents). *Khai ke bhanne sir, Nepal ko migration governance system ta damadol chha* (Sir, what can I say? In fact Nepal’s migration governance system is a big mess).

Ramhari Pandey, a journalist working on the issue, said, “*Yehanko law money le chalchha*” (here in Nepal, the law functions through money).<sup>10</sup> It seems that the situation has been generalised by these people for two main reasons: firstly, it is an outcome of their own experiences whilst going through the process. Secondly, local agents and others help create generalised perceptions as an attempt to defame government mechanisms in order to take extra benefits from the clients. This paper presents some specific case studies and discusses the reasons for such differences in the understanding of the governance system of Nepal’s labour migration. According to those who closely monitor the activities of the Department of Labour, the staff will go to any extent not to change their *modus operandus*. One agent reported,

They won’t say that it is due to interference of other government bodies, but they stop clearing the pending work citing unclear policies, insufficient documents, etc. Once the situation becomes normal, they continue to take extra benefit out of the work.

The author observed similar examples while dealing with cases involving manpower agencies during fieldwork.

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<sup>9</sup>As per the author’s discussion on 12 July 2014 and 13 January 2015.

<sup>10</sup>As per the author’s discussion on 14 January 2015.

**Case one:** Umesh (name changed), 25, applied on November 5, 2014, and was interviewed by a manpower agency to go to Qatar to work as a salesman. He was selected and asked to be ready to take a flight shortly, as his visa was to arrive in 10 days. He was informed on November 19, 2014, that his visa had been issued and it would take four to five days for its final approval by the Department of Labour. However, he had to wait for many more days, because the Department delayed issuing its final approval because a minor difference was noticed between the demand letter and the visa. In fact, Umesh had applied for the position of a salesman, but the visa that was issued was for a cashier.

The author met the Executive Director (ED) of the manpower agency when they were dealing with the Department of Labour for the final approval of Umesh's case. The ED stated,

We used to get easy approval from the Department in similar cases. But this time, they kept this case pending. I am trying hard to clear the document by using our channels but it seems that we have to wait for some time. I know it will be done once the fight between the two government organisations, the Department and the CIAA, is settled and the Department people return to work in normalcy.

The statements 'we used to get permission once we submitted the application with these types of documents' and 'we hope that we will get it this time too' tell us that the government authority used to give permissions in these types of cases, and now the same government has tried to tighten the system. But the actual story was different. A few days earlier, the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) –the anti-corruption body of Nepal– had intervened and arrested several government employees working at the Department of Foreign Employment, after a preliminary investigation found they were involved in approving fake documents to send workers to labour destinations in the Gulf. By way of showing their protest against this action taken by the CIAA, officials of the Foreign Employment Department created a hurdle by not completing the jobs assigned to them, including the issuing of prior and final approvals. They cited various legal and policy complications for this delay. However, their intention was to keep the process pending so that manpower

companies, agents and aspiring migrants would create pressure on the anti-corruption body to be flexible while looking at these cases.

Eventually, the manpower agency was granted final approval by the Department on the basis of documents submitted earlier, which made way for Umesh to fly to Qatar exactly after one week, on December 16, 2014. However, he had to pay an additional Rs 80,000, which is much higher than the figure of Rs 20,000 which is the official maximum approved service charge to be paid to go to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf countries. The author tried to understand how manpower companies respond to government rules when they go so far as to mention the higher amount workers are supposed to pay as commission in their notice boards. The notice boards of all manpower agencies mention that 'those who are going to Qatar need to pay NRs 20,000 only'. However, agencies do not allow aspirant labourers to fly to Qatar unless they pay Rs 80,000 to Rs 120,000 before departure. When the author asked agents in Qatar about the estimated costs of arranging demand papers including getting the information verified by manpower officers in Nepal, they asserted that it was impossible to send somebody out and stay within the government-approved limit of Rs 20,000. They said that manpower companies or recruiting agencies in Nepal have to pay handsome amounts to the people who issue demand letters from employers in the Gulf countries. "Yes, the employer in Qatar does not take money, but the manpower in Nepal has to pay commission to the agents who played the bridging role between the employer and the recruiting agency." That is why the visa is no longer free, and manpower agencies ask more money even if they claim to have obeyed the government and mention the government-sanctioned rate in their notice boards. The agencies are quite vocal in saying that only if the government would play the bridging role and would let them have access to demand letters without any payable commission, it would be possible for agencies to follow the imposed rules.

Officers and agents say that aspirant labourers with grievances can complain when manpower agencies demand rates that are higher than those mentioned in the rules. The Department of Labour may take action against the agency based on the complaint. But the question is, what will the aspirant labourers get out of this? Officers and agents argue that the process of sending labourers to the Gulf will be halted,

which will eventually lead to additional suffering on the part of unemployed Nepalis who wish to go abroad to work. In their attempt to manage this policy gap, manpower agencies have resorted to not providing a receipt (such as in the case of Umesh), or issuing a receipt stating the government-approved amount (Rs 20,000 in the case of Qatar), even if they charge additional commissions to be paid to local agents and agents in the destination countries. Since the receipt is directly linked to the compensation amount the worker can claim if he/she has to return home within the contract period, the worker is bound to suffer due to the non-transparent practice.

**Case two:** Kumar (name changed), 33, a Gulf aspirant labourer, secured a labourer visa for Qatar through his elder brother Sagun (name changed), who had been working in the country for almost five years. Though the visa was issued by the employer based on trust and Sagun's reliability, Kumar himself could not submit the documents to the Department of Labour for final approval. Rather, he had to hand his case over to a manpower company to act on his behalf. In fact, Kumar paid Rs 25,000 to the manpower company (again, more than the maximum amount set by the government), just to get the company's letterhead and seal. Only after paying such an exorbitant amount was he able to get final approval from the Department of Labour, and flew to Qatar on April 10, 2014.

A study (Gurung 2004: 16) shows that such labour migration on an individual basis is comparatively cheap (as it does not require the payment of various fees including a service charge to a manpower company in Nepal). But the government of Nepal has banned independent channels from seeking employment overseas against the provision of the Article 23 of Foreign Labour Act 2008, which allowed potential migrants to seek work overseas on an individual basis.<sup>11</sup> It is

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<sup>11</sup>If any individual wants to go abroad for employment, they should submit an application form; documents specifying the nature of work, the conditions and facilities of employment; a contract and work permit from their employers; and letters of consent from their guardians in Nepal. In addition, an individual should submit copies of their citizenship certificate, passport, and visa. Furthermore, they are required to produce an insurance certificate for Rs 100,000. If the Labour Ministry is satisfied with all these documents, it can grant permission for an individual to immigrate.

argued that the government changed the provision in an attempt to control illegal migration, claiming that that labourers will be more vulnerable if there is no responsible institution to compensate them in cases of any untoward incidents. But in practice, this has become a source of extra income for manpower companies without being accountable, and this practice is increasing. Moreover, aspirants are compelled to pay huge amounts to manpower companies who do not play any part in issuing documents and visas from employers in Qatar. Sagun, who secured the visa for Kumar, states that he sent more than 60 different visas to his villagers, relatives and others within a year. Each of them has to follow the same process of paying the manpower agency. So he has now secured a deal with a manpower agency in Koteshwor to get this work done at a cheaper rate. Both Kumar and Sagun are of the opinion that the government's policy was changed only to serve the interest of manpower companies. Sagun argues "Manpower companies are not better institutions to ease the process. Neither do they provide a cheap and reliable service, nor do the workers get due compensation from them through the process." The policy shift was due to the pressure of those companies so that they could earn easy money without being involved in the process.<sup>12</sup>

Sagun's argument corroborates data showing that there are very few institutional cases as compared to individual cases that have been forwarded to the court by the Department. According to a recent report, no case was filed in court even when there were 207 complaints registered against manpower agencies in the Department of Labour in the month of Paush 2071 (December/January 2014).<sup>13</sup> Sagun is also right in arguing that these companies will not be accountable to workers in crisis, since manpower companies are avoiding the issuance of receipts to clients, as the case of Umesh.

**Case three:** Ram (name changed), 33, who was working in Qatar on a labourer visa, returned to Nepal during Dashain. He made a deal with the same company that had arranged his earlier labourer visa to get it

<sup>12</sup>As per the author's Skype interview on May 14, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> For details, see <http://nepalishram.com/2071/N-21.php?id=881>. Accessed on 18 February 2014.



converted to a technical visa, which was better-salaried. Once they reached an agreement, he agreed to return to Qatar just after Dashain, and his visa was sent the next day. It was the original visa, but it was issued without following the proper process (as mentioned in the previous section of this article). The prescribed process could take more than a month, and since he had to start his job the following week, Ram consulted a manpower agent and agreed to pay Rs 35,000 to arrange his exit visa from the airport to fly back to Qatar. After booking his ticket, he informed the author that he would be flying the following day. 'I had no option except dealing with agents. I was granted a visa as I had agreed to join the job next week. I had to make it in any case and I happily paid Rs 35,000 for getting the work done,' he said.<sup>14</sup> After hearing this story, the author became interested in understanding this process and spoke to the agent who had helped Ram connect with government officers which brought the case to a success. The agent said,

After receiving a file, they check if it follows proper documentation, and if it does, they give their approval. If it does not, they check whether the name of the client is in the list (the one made out of the deal) circulated by friends/colleagues. Then they forward the file if the client has made a deal and his/her name is in the list. If the name is not in the list, then they decline from giving their approval. This is the case from department of labour to immigration.<sup>15</sup>

The author engaged with migrant workers and agents to understand the issue of fake documentation, and realised that that there is a gap between government officers (service providers) and ordinary people, or clients. There is room for the delivery of service without any manipulation as well. But the clients have to submit documents in the proper format and wait or return the following day. However, usually most documents will have one or other shortcoming, i.e. visa issued before demand letters, demand letters without proper documentation,

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<sup>14</sup>As per the author's discussion with Ram on 10 October 2014.

<sup>15</sup>As per the author's discussion with the agent on the 13 October 2014.

etc. If the document is incomplete or does not follow the suggested format, the officers will not take up the case. It seems relevant to discuss the following story, narrated by Mohan (name changed), a Nepali labour migrant now working in Bahrain, after returning to Nepal from a three-year experience as migrant worker in the Seychelles. He dealt with the Department of Labour with both original and fake documents. He said,

Once I submitted the original document before going abroad for final approval, I had to wait for more days and face more harassment such as standing in a long queue without any response from the officers. It took ten days to get a permit from the department. That is why I used fake documents while inviting my brother to Bahrain. I suggested that he use fake documents since I knew their working style. Even though he had original documents, he submitted fake documents along with a bribe of Rs 10, 000, and the work was done within three days without any hassle.<sup>16</sup>

We discussed the experiences of some migrants who were in the country while they were in the process of migrating, such as the experience of a labour migrant in Qatar who was engaged with the Nepalese mission there. Naresh (name changed), 35, is a semi-skilled migrant worker who has been working in Doha for seven years. He went through a manpower agent who was a resident of his own neighbourhood. He had been using a hand-written passport issued in 2007. According to the rules of the Nepal Government, all handwritten passports had to be replaced with machine-readable passports (MRPs) by November 24, 2015, as mandated by the International Civil Aviation Organization for its member countries. Naresh went to the Nepalese Embassy in Qatar at around 8.00 AM on 22 April 2014 to apply for a new passport. Because of the long queue of applicants, he could only submit the application after six hours. He was asked to collect the passport after four months, so he started browsing the website ([www.nembdoha.com](http://www.nembdoha.com)) from July 2014 onwards to find out whether his passport had been issued. One day, he saw his serial number (7370)

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<sup>16</sup>As per the author's discussion with Mohan on 12 December 2014.

listed on the website of the Embassy, so he went to the Embassy to collect his new passport, bringing with all the essential documents, i.e. the serial number, lot number, original citizenship and payment receipts, and joined a long queue. After a couple of hours, he submitted the documents and waited for some more hours as suggested by the Embassy officials. He was called up after three hours and told that the serial number he had referred to was not his own, and was asked to contact the embassy again once the passport had arrived. He tried to convince them that the number he mentioned was his own, but in the end, he returned without a passport. He visited the embassy again on 7 September 2014. An official repeated the same story, and he returned to work. The third time he went to the Embassy, in the last week of November 2014, he went directly to the reception and asked for an update on his application, which had been pending for eight months. The receptionist searched his name and serial number in his computer, noted these details down in a paper and went to the room from where passports were being distributed. But the receptionist returned empty-handed, and said he couldn't find the passport. Again Naresh returned to work without any news about his passport. He visited the Embassy again on 8 December 2014, met the receptionist and repeated his story with evidence. The receptionist checked but could not find the passport, and suggested Naresh should discuss the matter with the second secretary of the Embassy. Once Naresh narrated the whole story to him, the second secretary replied that there were many people who had the same name and that "the name published in the webpage might be of another Naresh." Once Naresh asked the official why even after eight months his passport was not prepared, the official advised him to resubmit the application saying it was the 'easiest solution'. Since Naresh had no other option, he bought a new application form by paying 30 Qatari Riyal, filled it out again and queued to submit it. "While I was submitting the new application, the staff person who was there to receive the form came up with the suggestion to keep inquiring about the old application. He stated that the passport might have been misplaced somewhere." Even though Naresh submitted a new application, he wanted to follow up on his previous application, and for this he met the receptionist, referred his conversation with the form-receiving staff and requested them to look for the passport once again.

Then the receptionist asked Naresh whether the second secretary had already checked the bundle of passports. He replied, ‘Sir checked nothing but advised me to fill up a new form,’ so the receptionist went to the second secretary's room with the old passport. Within two minutes, the receptionist came with a new passport, saying, “Here’s your passport.” Once the passport was found with these extra efforts, the second secretary signed it without any regret, and suggested that Naresh collect it from another room. As a passing remark, the second secretary said, “I don’t know where it came from.”

Having gone through such cases, it can be said that there is a very strong network that is active in the migration governance or management process in Nepal. Since the whole governance system is untrustworthy,<sup>17</sup> many perceive the process of going abroad and finding a job as a personal matter. Most of them do not think that the government helps make the process easier, cheaper or safer. The workers and aspirants get information about the availability of jobs either through friends and relatives or through local elites or agents. Research conducted by The Asia Foundation (2013) shows that few aspirant labourers could identify any source of knowledge of safe labour migration, and out of those very few around 66 percent reported that they learned about safe labour migration from relatives and friends. The study also states that the availability of visa or visa sent through relatives, and the affordability of migration to the destination countries, along with the presence of spouses or relatives in the destination countries, are the most prominent reasons for aspirant labourers to embark in foreign employment. The study also reveals that only 10.09 percent of the returnee migrants in Nepal contacted labour migration agencies through newspaper advertisements. Thus, it can be said that for most people labour migration is initiated through informal channels

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<sup>17</sup> The Village Development Committee (VDC) secretary asks for money for the application form before forwarding it to issue a citizenship card which is a primary document for issuing a passport; the District Administration Office, even after charging a fee for passport, procrastinates the process for many days before issuing the same; a manpower agency or a local agent creates unnecessary hurdles by postponing the date of departure time and again. These activities certainly lead to a distrust in governance for any person. I do not, however, claim that all government officers in Nepal take bribes during the outmigration process.

of friends, family or acquaintances, which is illegal according to Nepalese law. It has to be understood that people tend to trust intermediary agents more than formal recruitment agencies and other mechanisms set up by the government, for reasons of easy access and regular interactions. In fact, intermediaries are usually a part of the migrants' community and can play a valuable role. One article rightly acknowledges the positive role of sub-agents in a society like that of Nepal, noting that

the role of the sub-agents needs to take into account that many or possibly most prospective migrants from small village communities are more likely to trust the local sub-agent compared with the government or urban-based private recruitment agencies. They are also more likely to process papers more quickly. More importantly, sub-agents can be made liable if anything goes wrong, precisely because of their accessibility at the local level. And there are examples of local sub-agents taking responsibility for problems such as lower wages than promised, or unpaid wages. Even though payments to sub-agents are always in cash with no receipts, no paperwork (i.e. no written evidence), local village adjudication or village courts can have cases brought to them by the migrant worker on their return (or their guardian in the village). The sub-agent can be apprehended and forced to pay compensation. If the sub-agent does not pay, it would be a continuous problem for them to remain living in the village. This can be a much more efficient means of dispute resolution than going through the government and court systems (Jureidini 2014: 61).

A study by The Asia Foundation (2013: 18) mentions that 33 percent of returnees claimed to have known the agent before they began processing their case, 22 percent reported that the agent was a resident of their village, and the remaining 45 percent reported that their relatives and friends helped them find an agent. This is why local agents survive even when the government comes up with a policy to discourage them.

In an attempt at strengthening labour migration governance, the Government of Nepal introduced a new Foreign Employment Act in

2007, replacing the first ever Foreign Employment Act of 1985, the objective of which was to “control and regulate” foreign labour migration (Sijapati and Limbu 2012: 3). Also, the introduction of the Foreign Employment Rules 2008 within a year of the introduction of the Act can be considered as the government’s commitment to the issue, as it took around 14 years to introduce the first Foreign Employment Rules, 1999 after the first Foreign Employment Act, 1985.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Nepal now has the Foreign Employment Policy, 2012, which itself shows that the Government of Nepal wishes to understand the problems in this area and act accordingly. The background statement of the policy by-and-large identifies the major challenges and problems in the area of labour migration.<sup>19</sup>

Since the mistreatment of Nepalese workers abroad is a matter of public concern in Nepal, the Government of Nepal states that it has responded to this matter in several ways, including through a dialogue with counterparts in destination countries. The concerned ministries say that they have succeeded in signing bilateral agreements or memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with three Gulf countries on the provision of labour. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has opened embassies in all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) as well as in Israel, and a consulate in Lebanon. Additionally, since late 2011, some embassies have begun housing labour attachés appointed by the MoLE to provide specific migrant labour-related functions, under the authority of the ambassador. Besides these activities within

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<sup>18</sup> The first Foreign Employment Rules came into existence only in 1999 though the Act was in place in 1985 itself.

<sup>19</sup> It states: “Individuals who are willing to depart abroad for foreign employment are facing insecurity due to lack of proper information which is seen as a key problem...there are many other major problems related to foreign employee like lack of effective implementation of mandatory orientation program that articulated by law; lack of generating skilled and professional human resources; lack of provision to disseminate minimum knowledge on labour law, lifestyle, culture and language of destination countries; workers are unable to receive remuneration and facilities as per signed contract or are forced to work other than designated work or hazardous work. Further due to false documents or applying wrong procedure, increasing trend to go to foreign employment through open border without approval, and also using visit visa or entry visa and not having labour approval is increasing vulnerability of trafficking and exploitation for Nepali workers.”

government mechanisms, there are some programmes which have been formalised through co-operative agreements between Nepalese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the MoFA of Nepal, and between trade unions in Nepal and destination countries to help migrant workers in several Gulf countries with large Nepalese populations. In other words, Nepali leaders, parliamentarians and policy makers have together introduced and revised laws and policies related to migration. The implementing agencies, i.e. the Department of Passport, the Department of Labour, and the Ministry of Labour also narrate their “rigorous work” to make “foreign employment respected, safe and well-managed.”<sup>20</sup>

Research has also identified a widening gap between people, policy-making and implementing agencies in understanding the governance of migration, even though there are new acts and policies to deal with migration governance. Most of the political party leaders and government officials refer to the government’s recent attempt to introduce new acts, rules, policies, etc. along the lines of what the former minister of labour and leader of the Maoist party, Post Bahadur Bogati said, “What I have observed is that the function of the government is to make laws and maintain law and order situation by implementing those laws whereas it is seen that people are there to break law and order.”<sup>21</sup> The author also regularly participated in the policy makers’ club. Studies including Paoletti *et al.* (2014) show that Nepal has significantly strengthened its governance of labour migration with the introduction of new acts, rules and policies related to foreign employment. Those individuals who are instrumental in dealing with policy issues often suggest going with rigid policies for the sake of correcting the system in order to address labour migration-related problems. Following the suggestions of these leaders and bureaucrats, the Government of Nepal has come up with many legal provisions, rules and regulations without considering whether these new provisions really help to overcome problems. The latest Foreign Employment Policy, 2012 can be considered an attempt to achieve a better

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<sup>20</sup>See the official website of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Nepal <http://www.mole.gov.np/nep/page/workpriority.html>. Accessed on 17 February 2015.

<sup>21</sup>As per the author’s discussion with Bogati on 23 March 2014.

governance of labour migration. The policy states that there are many other issues like the weak institutional capacity, the increase of human resource companies in quantity rather than quality, the lack of direct communication with employers in destination countries, the lack of transparency of their working system, the illegal functioning of migration agents including the lack of registration and manipulation by unauthorised agents, the use of false documents, etc. Hurdles in providing competitive services are also created by the poor service quality of listed medical professionals for medical check-ups of workers, and the restricted working areas of listed health set-ups due to the influence of destination countries at the time of selection. Other issues related to labour migration are the centralised structure of foreign employment agencies, along with inefficient human resources and an insufficient handling capacity for the number of migrant workers, the lack of implementation of an integrated labour migration information system, the lack of effective monitoring and supervision systems for foreign employment and related agency activities. Furthermore, other problems and issues identified in the policy document include the lack of effective legal mechanisms to control fraudulent activities related to foreign employment, the lack of legal remedy due to lack of bilateral agreements with destination countries, the lack of monitoring and review of existing bilateral agreements and also the non-effective mobilisation of viable local resources by local authorities, the lack of good governance in foreign employment management, the pathetic market promotion, the lack of government efforts to protect the rights and interest of the Nepalese workers, the use of informal channels for inward remittance and non-investment in the productive sector, the limited diplomatic presence, the lack of mobilisation of diplomatic agencies in destination countries in economic and labour diplomacy, the lack of effective mobilisation of non-resident Nepalis at destination countries and the absence of diplomatic missions of destination countries in Nepal, the nominal state-investment for employment management, the poor co-ordinating mechanisms, the poor status of law implementation, the low involvement of local governance, the lack of public sensitisation, the lack of mechanisms for training human resources, etc.



But no law or policy alone can help without an understanding of the root causes of the problems. As a result, those new provisions remain not only non-implemented but also provide more space to agencies and agents to manipulate and misuse the policies for their own interests. For example, the Government of Nepal fixed the maximum amount to be paid by potential workers to manpower agencies at Rs 80,000 for Malaysia and Rs 70,000 for Saudi Arabia if the visa applied for is not free. People only need to pay a maximum of Rs 20,000 plus flight tickets to go to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf countries, who all issue free visas for workers. But people reportedly have been paying amounts of Rs 100,000 to Rs 160,000, even for going to Qatar.<sup>22</sup>

The problem is not just limited to areas of migration management or migration governance. Nepal has been facing challenges in each and every sector of governance. Issues such as the lack of proper implementation of policies, loopholes in policies and acts, and the lack of mechanisms to track the process (and follow up on it) may be reflections of a general governance problem. However, labour migration, being a new and grey area, has its own specific problems, i.e. an unclear policy implementation due to the government's dilemma whether to prioritise creating a structure for better management or continuing in an ad-hoc manner and defining this as just a temporary phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> Many individuals, including senior policy makers and bureaucrats, cite the lack of stable leadership as affecting functions and services of the government bodies, including the organisations working for migration management.

To conclude, the public opinion of many Nepalis is that it is not bad to go overseas using informal channels, and the persons working as intermediaries or local agents are not shunned by society. This is partly because people are using similar networks to migrate from villages into urban areas to find work. Village network and middlemen have been the major source of recruitment of labour from Nepali villages to urban areas like Kathmandu (Graner 2001: 253-259). It is partly because people consider finding a job as a matter of their own private and individual

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<sup>22</sup>As per the author's discussion on 12 May 2014.

<sup>23</sup>The government and politicians state that labour migration is a temporary phenomenon and has to be dealt with accordingly.

concern where there is no government body to regulate it. Since this process has continued for long without interference of any institutions, society is not concerned whether a person goes abroad through formal or informal channels. They know that going to work abroad will involve suffering (*dukkha*), and that they have to face problems during the migration process as well as in the destination country. But they have chosen this option of labour migration 'with the greater feeling of familial obligation rather than individualistic orientation,' as discussed by Williams *et al.* (2014 800).

Once people see government officers in the picture with many practical and impractical recommendations, they seem to perceive it as an intervention. This seems to be the reason for the existence of such a huge gap between policy makers and implementing agencies and their clients in their understanding of the governance system of international labour migration in Nepal. As far as the involvement of the Nepal Government is concerned, it appears that it is not/was not its priority to engage with labour management. One of the common responses collected by the author while interviewing former policy makers and chiefs of implementing bodies of the Government of Nepal is: "I don't know what is happening there today, but I can tell you something based on my experience while I was working there." Since the matter of labour management is directly related to the life of a citizen, the government started doing something, partly to respond to pressure from the media and civil society, and partly to follow an international trend.

However, it seems that both policy makers and migrants, including potential migrants, are caught up in a dilemma that eventually leads to the creation more confusion and provides space for criticism. For example, most of the policy makers interviewed for this study stated that there should be stable leadership in the departments that deal with the issue of migrant labour. Policy makers also often mentioned the need for institutional memory and familiarity in sensitive issues, which are only possible if there is somebody with a mandate over a longer period of time.

As mentioned above, some of these dilemmas are related to the overall governance system of Nepal, which needs to be reformed and restructured, which is not possible overnight or in the short term.

However, it is essential to aim for serious introspection, and to create specific mechanisms to deal with this issue. It seems that the non-implementation of most of the safe migration-related policies that were introduced recently has something to do with those confusions or complexes faced by policy makers in Nepal. In other words, most of the policy makers work with an inferior psychology or an inferiority complex when they deal with international migration. On the one hand, they opt for policy rigidity without realising that rigid laws are not always helpful in changing decisions of migrants of aspirant migrants, as described by Haines (2013: 81).<sup>24</sup> Most manpower agents that were interviewed for this study acknowledged that they could make more money if the government would tighten the process. one agent said,

What I understood from my ten-year experience working with the Department of Labour is that they tighten the process not to control or stop something but to get more money (bribes) out of the process... It doesn't matter for an agent like us. If the officers ask for 3,000 as bribe, we will add 10,000 more for us and charge 13,000 from the client. That is why the real sufferer is the client, not us.

It may be due to the officers' greediness and working style, but it has become easy for local agents and middlemen to defame government institutions and take extra benefits from the clients. During fieldwork, the author observed that the bureaucrats involved are often influenced by *afno mancche* (their own people)<sup>25</sup> and *chineko manchhe* (people known by them) even during office hours. If some *afno mancche* or *chineko manchhe* came in during office hours, the officials try to do them a favour either by prioritising their work differently or by spending time with them. Since local agents are excessively involved in the process of issuing citizenship certificates and passports, they become the *chineko manchhe* of the local bureaucrats even if they are not *afno manchhe* as

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<sup>24</sup> New and strict policies may not always help in controlling illegal migration in cases where foreign labour migration is not considered as an option but a necessity; rather such policies may produce more complicated and expensive migration, along with greatly increased danger, as discussed by Haines (2013: 80) in the case of border management between Mexico and United States.

<sup>25</sup> For details, see Bista (1991).

defined by Bista (1991). The report by The Asia Foundation (2013:13) reveals that only 6.9 percent of the Nepalis aspiring to go abroad for labour migration took initiatives themselves to procure the necessary travel documents.

While doing so, these government officers do not care whether people are in the middle of their work or if there is a long queue waiting for the officer's response. If a government representative practices this *modus operandus*, it leads to the public assumption that the government is serving for only the *thulo*<sup>26</sup> or *afno manchhe*. It seems that the local elite who work as middlemen or local agents for labour migration not only exploit this culture but also tell others negative stories about bureaucrats, to create a distance between the government and the people. As a result, those members of the public who face such a scenario in which a duty officer would serve someone who arrived later than the others, the next time may prefer not to come alone but to use middlemen. And, the middlemen or local agents will benefit from creating stories against government institutions in order to extract more money from clients.

On the other hand, most of the new laws and policies introduced to deal with these problems end up being poorly implemented. For example, since the trend of a large number of Nepali youths who are entering the labour market has been understood by Nepali policy makers to be a problem, considering that there is no institutional capacity to absorb them within the country itself, Nepali policy makers are hesitant to bring labour-related issues to the attention of their counterparts in migrant-receiving countries. As a result, new laws and policies become ineffective as there are many issues which cannot be addressed alone by Nepal without the involvement of the migrant-receiving counterparts. This pressure-induced flexibility is the major reason for some greedy bureaucrats to create extra advantages for themselves, i.e. bribes and favouritism, which eventually creates a strong but negative perception about the government system.

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<sup>26</sup>*Thulo* can sometimes be interchanged with *chineko*, because the general perception is that a *thulomanche* is he/she who is known to everybody.

Political transition has become a strong pretext to cite and to avoid even a minimum reform of the system. But this should not be the case in dealing with issues related to labour migration. In fact, activities in the name of transitional politics helped people including migrants and aspirant migrants to create a negative perception towards Nepal's governance system in general and the governance of labour migration in particular. On the one hand, the migrants see that the money remitted by them has become a major source of the country's economic activities and survival, and on the other hand, they quite often witness the fallibility of the leadership of the country, who are happy to sell radical promises to the people.

While discussing the perception of migrants and aspirant migrants about migration governance, the author found dilemma and contradiction among them of a similar kind as with the policy makers. The emotional perspectives of migrants and aspirant migrants, such as 'my country should do better so that I can go back,' also contributed to a negative understanding of the governance system. It has to be realized that the migrants themselves have also played a crucial role in weakening the governance of Nepal's labour migration. They are the ones who, in most of the cases narrated above, used illegal methods to migrate. What would happen if they had been ready to wait till end of the official process? What could be the result if, instead of pressurising the Department of Labour to issue a final approval, they requested their foreign employer to send them the visa with the proper documentation? Do they consider themselves to be equally guilty in weakening the governance by being a source of bribery? For instance, generally, in bribery systems, the giver and the receiver are both equally considered guilty. If the migrants, returnees and aspirants were ready to engage with such questions, it would help not only in changing the mindset of the people, especially of those involved in migration, but it would help the migration governance system as well.

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# Dmitri P. Nedbailoff, the Great Unknown

Bart Hetebrij

## Introduction

Amongst other researchers, Roger Croston, a British expert on mid-twentieth century Tibetan history has written several articles about the last five remaining Westerners who lived in Tibet before the Chinese invasion of December 1950. However, over the decades he and other Tibetologists managed to find out very little about one of them – an almost unknown Russian, Mr Dmitri Nedbailoff. In 2012, Croston wrote a short article in *The Times* [London], stating that the story of ‘Nedbailoff of Tibet’ remained an almost complete mystery. In this article, I have tried to finally put this intriguing question to rest.

32/43561 PAIBU

NAME NEDBAILOFF  
Dmitri P

Address of Mrs. Jones  
28 Huddle St. Paddy

Nationality Stateless

Place of Birth Kiev, Russia

Date of Birth 6/11/06

Single or Married Single

Occupation Electrical Engineer

Arrived in Australia on 24/3/51

Port of Sydney per Aranta

S. P. Nedbailoff  
Signature of Holder

Certificate issued at Sydney  
on 27/3/51

Issued by M. G. G. G.  
For COMMONWEALTH MIGRATION OFFICER.

Personal Description: 1  
Height 5 ft 9 ins.  
Build Medium  
Eyes Blue Hair Fair

Remarks

DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION

Four of the five Westerners are well known and documented. They are Reginald Fox and Robert Ford (both British), and Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter (both Austrian). The first two worked for the



government of British India, whereas the other two escaped from it. Harrer describes his flight to Tibet in the book *'Seven Years in Tibet'*, and the story has been adapted for screenplay (film) with the same title. Although Harrer briefly mentions Nedbailoff as a hardened adventurer, little else is known about this mysterious fifth remaining 'Westerner' in Tibet.

Nedbailoff was, strictly speaking, not a 'Westerner' at all. He was born in 1906 in Kiev, Russia. I stumbled on his details by chance when I read a letter in a Dutch magazine for army veterans - "Checkpoint" - from a veteran, Mr Ton Doesborgh, who had served as a soldier from 1953 to 1955 in the former Dutch New Guinea on a small island in the Raja Ampat, called Saonek. There, he had a bizarre encounter with Nedbailoff who was at that time trying to sail from Australia to India to claim his 'lost' passport. His boat was barely eleven feet long. What an extraordinary and daring adventure! I contacted Mr. Doesborgh. And although his story was far from complete I was impressed by his account and decided to research Nedbailoff's life and to write about him. In June 2015, I finished my booklet (72 pages) and gave it the title "De gruwel van staatloosheid" (*"The Horror of Being Stateless"*).

### **The Long March**

Although born in Kiev, it is not certain if Nedbailoff lived there during his childhood. One source mentions Vladivostok, in the far east of Russia, as the place where he was drafted into the White Russian Army. He was eleven or twelve years old and he had already been orphaned by the First World War (1914-1918). The Russian Civil War had been cruel on all sides, and millions died between 1918 and 1922 when the Bolshevik's Red Army finally defeated the White army consisting of officers and Cossacks, the "Bourgeoisie" and other opposing factions.

Nedbailoff fled to China with the remainder of the beaten army. He was on his own now and barely sixteen years old. At some point he moved from Harbin to Mukden (today known as Shenyang). In the meantime, he learned to speak Chinese Mandarin and worked as a mechanic. When in 1931 the Japanese Army staged "The Mukden or Manchurian Incident", engineered by rogue Japanese military personnel as a pretext for the Japanese invasion in 1931 of Northeast China, known as Manchuria, Nedbailoff moved on.

Doing odd jobs, he crossed the whole of China on foot! In Cangyuan, not far from the Burmese border, he finally got a Chinese passport. For the first time in his life he could legally cross a border. He did not take any jobs in Burma but walked all the way to Calcutta, British India. Finding work there as an electro-mechanic was no problem: he first worked for the German company Siemens, and when the Second World War broke out for General Electric, a North American company.

### **Internment Camp**

When the Soviet Union joined the Allied Forces in 1941, Nedbailoff withdrew his earlier statement to the British Indian authorities in which he had promised to do nothing adverse to the Allied cause. Serious consequences followed. He was arrested and taken to the wartime civilian internment camp at Dehra Dun, Mussoorie. His passport was confiscated and never returned. In Dehra Dun, he met the Austrian mountaineers Harrer and Aufschnaiter. As civilian Prisoners-of-War under the Geneva Convention, they were far better off than Nedbailoff. As a stateless person, all rights were stripped from him. In 1944, Harrer and Aufschnaiter escaped to Tibet. Nedbailoff escaped later in 1947, after the authorities had threatened to extradite him to the Soviet Union (which would have meant certain death). He was caught in Yatung in the Chumbi Valley, just on Tibetan soil, by the resident British Agent, escorted to Gangtok the capital of Sikkim, and sentenced to 'hard labour' for a period of two and a half years for escaping Dehra Dun. Working on the roadside, he was spotted by a British official who sent the resident radio operator, Robert Ford, to investigate as to who he was. Because of Ford's involvement, Nedbailoff was allowed to work on the local power plant and in the Palace of the Maharaja of Sikkim.

### **Tibet**

The Maharaja put in a good word for Nedbailoff to officials of the Tibetan government. They were searching for technicians for their power plant in Lhasa and invited him to work for them. After completing his sentence in Sikkim, he accepted their invitation in February 1949 and went to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. There he met his old friends Aufschnaiter and Harrer. He worked and made plans with them, but not for long because the Chinese communist People's

Liberation Army were on their doorstep. In October 1950, the Chinese started to move in. The situation was desperate. On 19th December 1950 the Dalai Lama left the capital for Dromo near the Indian border. Harrer,



Aufschnaiter and Fox also moved south. Meanwhile, Ford was captured in Chamdo by the Chinese. But what of Nedbailoff? Was he accompanying the Dalai Lama or did he remain behind in the rearguard with his employer Tsarong, Commander in Chief of Tibet? We don't know for sure. Nedbailoff asserted that he was ordered to leave Tibet by the Indian

envoy in Lhasa. But when did he leave? We have a clue – the West Bengal authorities issued an identity document for Nedbailoff dated 11th November, 1950. This could mean that he left Tibet before the Dalai Lama and his party returned to Lhasa in August 1951.

### Odyssey

The condition for issuing an identity document to Nedbailoff was for him to leave India within six months. He decided to emigrate to Australia and in March 1951 he arrived with the ship “SS Orontes” in Sydney. But Australia was, so to say, not his cup of tea. Finding work was difficult and he did not feel welcome. Co-workers called him “a dirty reffo” (refugee) and he wanted to return to India to claim his ‘lost’ passport. The Australian authorities were not cooperative so he worked on a plan to build a boat and sail all the way to India. It was not a bold and daring plan: rather, it was a totally irresponsible and insane idea. Nevertheless he did just that, leaving Australia on 23rd July, 1953 in his eleven-foot long boat named named *Vitaz* or “knight” in Russian - he was a knight on mission against all the injustice done to him. Sailing along the Torres Strait islands he reached Port Daru, on the southern coast of Papua New Guinea. From there on he sailed westward to Merauke, Dutch New Guinea, where he was allowed to work, pending a permit to stay. For the local Chinese community, he was a peculiarity, a European who spoke fluent Mandarin and who was familiar with their customs. He was finally cleared for immigration in Dutch New Guinea,

but was not allowed to transport his boat as cargo on a coaster to Sorong. So he set sail again and continued his quest. The Arafura Sea is treacherous and the coast was also far from safe because cannibals were not uncommon on those shores. He was warned not to land on the Casuarinen coast. Despite strong currents and adverse wind, he finally reached Sorong, on the west side of Dutch Papua New Guinea, where he was trying to find a job to pay for maintenance and restoring the damage to his boat. Shell offered him a job but for unclear reasons the authorities did not grant him permission to work. They also refused him entry to Sorong, so he had to stay on Doom, a small island in the harbour of that city. Fortunately, he was able to work as the personal attendant of a wealthy Chinese merchant.

Later he continued his journey and reached the island of Saonek. There he met Mr. Ton Doesborgh, a Dutch soldier on an outpost who interrogated Nedbailoff because the situation between independent Indonesia and Dutch New Guinea was tense. The Dutch would not give up the western part of New Guinea to Indonesia, despite threatening language from its President Sukarno, the leader of his country's struggle for Independence from the Netherlands, and who was feeling powerful because of his nation's backing by the Soviet Union. However, Doesborgh was quickly convinced that Nedbailoff was not a Russian spy but rather an adventurer - especially after he saw Nedbailoff's photographs of the Dalai Lama and Tibet which Nedbailoff always kept with him.

Before saying goodbye, Doesborgh provided Nedbailoff with food and materials and gave him some advice. From Saonek, Nedbailoff sailed to the island of Gag. This uninhabited place was the last Dutch territory before the border with Indonesia. As a 'Robinson Crusoe', he lived there for six months - all alone. He made four attempts to sail to Indonesia, but every time West winds blew him back to where he started from. In June he finally set foot on the Indonesian island of Gebe where he was immediately surrounded by natives armed with bamboo spears. The military took charge of him and he was transported to Halmahera, the largest of the Maluku Islands, and later to Ambon. The interrogations were violent, as the military suspected him of being a Dutch spy. In August 1955, he was taken to Makassar, Celebes and in November of that year he obtained permission to leave the country.

With help from the British consul in Surabaya he arrived in Singapore in April 1956. According to *'The Straits Times'* newspaper, before sailing out again he found shelter in a social welfare home for nearly two months. Later he accepted a job for a couple of weeks in the harbour of Penang and then set off for the Andaman Sea. There, more precisely in the Gulf of Martaban, he ran into trouble when a storm hit his small boat with gale force and he lost the rudder and one of the oars. The situation worsened when the stern was damaged. His boat was at risk and if it took on water, then all was lost. Somehow he managed to reach the harbour of Rangoon where he got permission to put the boat ashore for repairs. But while bringing the boat ashore the local police forced him and his boat back out into the open sea beyond Burmese territorial waters. He became desperate. How to survive with hardly any water and no rudder and just one oar? Somehow he survived using the remaining oar as an improvised a rudder and living on rainwater and freshly caught fish. Six weeks later he reached the westernmost harbour of Burma at Sittwe, but three miles south of St Martin's Island, he ran out of luck. A south-west hurricane was forming and 17 miles east of the River Naf, the *Vitaz* was thrown onto the Burmese coast, not far from the East Pakistan border. It was completely destroyed and Nedbailoff must have considered himself lucky to still be alive.

### **Hell on Earth**

He then crossed the border of East Pakistan on foot. Arriving at the police station in Teknaph, he was immediately arrested and brought to Cox's Bazar and later escorted to a prison in Dhaka. He lost a lot of weight during his forty-five days in prison. The circumstances were abominable. After he served his sentence, the police escorted him back to the border with India. But the Indians considered him an illegal alien and he disappeared for two months into the Alipore Prison in Calcutta. Once released he was sent back to East Pakistan. Here he was arrested again and sent to the Chuadanga Prison for another two months. The circumstances were as bad as in Dhaka. After being released they put him right back on a train to India. Arriving in Banpur he was caught once more by the Indian police and put on a train in the opposite direction back to East Pakistan. In East Pakistan he was arrested yet again and detained for a night. The following morning, he was escorted

back to the border, where the border police threatened to shoot him if he ever returned. Once again they sent him across into India, this time on foot. He walked for twenty miles before taking a train to Calcutta where he reported himself to the authorities. During their investigations he was not allowed to work or leave Calcutta. He sent a petition to the United Nations in New York, in which he explained his dire situation. There was no response. Meanwhile he was sent for trial and sentenced to serve another five months in Alipore Prison for violating immigration laws. In February 1959, he was set free but had to leave the country. By now he was out of options. He was fifty-three years old.

Realising that written petitions did not work, Nedbailoff decided that it was time to deliver the message himself. His plan was to present his petition in person to the International Court in The Hague. Accordingly, he travelled to the harbour of Marmugoa and hid himself on a Swiss owned ship bound for The Netherlands. His plan succeeded; he arrived in Rotterdam. The Swiss shipping company was held responsible for his presence in The Netherlands, and when Nedbailoff was diagnosed with tuberculosis, he was admitted to a hospital with the bill being sent to the shipping company.

### **Finally**

His presence in The Netherlands did not go unnoticed and his arrival drew some media attention. Although the Swiss authorities granted him asylum in 1961, his remaining years ended in misery and poverty. He was unable to adapt himself to a regular life, let alone the limited and strictly regulated Swiss way of life. He had problems keeping a job and he failed to get along with the authorities, still fighting both the UN and India for the injustice brought upon him. He remained restless, at times traveling to the USA and north and East Africa, until his death in 1980. We do not know how he died or where his final remains are located. Dmitri Nedbailoff was an adventurer, a restless wanderer, a modern day Don Quixote who was constantly battling against unfair and cold-hearted authorities, but above all a stateless outcast, whose life always drifted between hope and despair.

## BOOK REVIEWS

## **The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas: Local Attachments and Boundary Politics**

Edited by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gérard Toffin. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2011, 346 pp., ISBN 978-81-321-0524-4, price Rs. 850.

## **Facing Globalization in the Himalayas: Belonging and the Politics of the Self**

Edited by Gérard Toffin and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2014, 471 pp., ISBN 978-81-321-1162-7, price Rs. 995.

Reviewed by Luke Wagner

In the two volumes under review, editors Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gérard Toffin present the case for applying the concept of 'belonging' in analyses of Himalayan social life. The first volume, *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas*, explores the application of the concept from the ground up, so to speak. Themes like territory, indigeneity, ritual, state-formation, and nationalism are at the fore. The second volume, *Facing Globalization in the Himalayas*, focuses on contemporary experiences and the shifting terms of belonging in the context of globalization. The chapters relate to themes like religion, migration, development, activism, and political change. The volumes are the products of two separate conferences held in 2007 and 2008.

Belonging, the editors argue, is better suited as a frame of analysis than traditional tools because it allows us to articulate the empirical complexity of lived experiences, to make comparisons and analyze changes over time and space, and to express the affinities that bind social groups in a positive manner. They are particularly concerned with disrupting the tendency to constrain analyses with notions of identity, which they view as conceptually thin, static, and too narrowly focused on processes of othering. Although the concept of belonging as an analytical lens is not new, it had been in circulation primarily amongst scholars focused on 'the West'. These two volumes represent the first concerted effort to apply the concept to Himalayan settings, and the editors corralled some of the most well-known figures in



Himalayan studies to do so. For this, the efforts of the editors will be (and have been) warmly received by scholars seeking correctives to the limitations and essentialist legacies of identity formulations in scholarship on the Himalayas.

The intuitive appeal of belonging as an analytical frame is strengthened by the theoretical work and conceptual architecture the editors present in the introduction to the first volume. Here, they detail what they propose as 'the three dimensions of belonging: commonality, mutuality, and attachment' (p. xv). 'Commonality' focuses on relationships and the performance of emotional ties like solidarity. Though it is closely related to notions of identity, the emphasis is on the 'common core' that binds units rather than the externalities that juxtapose them (p. xvi). 'Mutuality' highlights the formal and informal social relations that produce a sense of belonging in different settings. This is particularly useful in developing an understanding of the similarities and differences between so-called traditional and modern social groupings, which allows us to examine change over time. 'Attachment' refers to material and immaterial connections that can stabilize a sense of belonging or impede the development of new ties. Whether formal or informal – land titles or intimate childhood memories, for example – this dimension helps us to understand how and why belonging can act as a mobilizing force in some settings and a demobilizing force in others.

Despite this strong start, the volumes ultimately do not serve as persuasive accounts of the broad value of embracing the concept of belonging as an analytical frame. While the volumes leave no doubt that belonging is a useful heuristic, the breadth of empirical cases explored and the multiple (and often casual) ways in which the term 'belonging' is used impart the worrying impression that it could become another catch-all. The concept of belonging certainly achieves the goal of loosening the restraints imposed by notions of identity, but the volumes on the whole illustrate that we need to be careful in our application of the concept and bind it for specific purposes if we want it to provide analytical acuity. For the most part, the theoretical and analytical shortcomings of the volumes can be attributed to the lack of engagement with the concept of belonging itself that many of the chapters display. Only a handful of contributors seem to take seriously

the stakes of applying belonging as analytical framework, even less offer any kind of insight into how we might go about doing so, and fewer still clearly demonstrate its application. More often than not, contributors mention the term belonging or intersperse it throughout the text, but proceed to discuss their cases using the same terms and lenses that we would expect absent the editors' intervention. This tendency is more pronounced in the first volume than the second, but holds true if they are considered collectively.

This is not to say that the volumes should be ignored or not considered seriously. On the contrary, anyone engaged in social research in the Himalayas – and especially scholars in the early stages of their careers – would be well served by reading the introductions to each volume and will find it rewarding to consider the chapters empirically relevant to their own work. Potential readers should simply be aware that chapters ought to be read selectively and that many of the chapters are rich empirical accounts for which the concept of belonging serves as a springboard. Even if all of the wrinkles have not yet been ironed out, the concept of belonging is clearly promising and should be further considered. One of the explanations for the shortcomings in some chapters may be that the frame of belonging is applied to data that was collected without such an application in mind. It may be the case that attention to the dimensions of belonging needs to be incorporated into methodological approaches before an analytical shift can take place. If the volumes help to inspire a new approach to research methodology, that would be a major achievement.

Regardless of judgments on the volumes as a whole, each one includes a number of intriguing contributions and reveals interesting avenues for future research. *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas* includes 14 chapters, excluding the introduction, that are organized into three parts: 'Territoriality and Indigeneity'; 'Socio-religious Bonding'; and 'Commitments and Conflicts'. The chapters move through different sites of belonging – from the village to the valley to the state; from temples to sacred landscapes; and from fields to parks – as well as different levels of perspective – from individuals to ethnic groups to administrative bodies.

The concept of belonging is applied to better understand claims of indigeneity, ethnicity, and authority, as we might expect, but there are

also surprising turns, such as the role of labour and bureaucracy. Gisèle Krauskopff, for example, argues that residence in a shared territorial space and collective labour on that land were the key markers of a belonging in a valley in Western Nepal up until the 1980s, when they began to be obscured by the rhetoric of ethnic identity that emerged as a long-term consequence of Rana-era legal codes and caste ideology (p. 38). Daniela Berti closes the volume with one of the most exciting chapters, walking us through court proceedings in Himachal Pradesh and illustrating how belonging becomes 'a factor or a condition' that influences the outcome of a trial (p. 292). From the perspective of the judiciary, the testimony of witnesses who belong to the same village as a defendant is often treated as highly suspect given their ties. On the other hand, villagers often appeal civil cases to courts rather than village councils precisely because judges come from outside areas and are considered more neutral given that they do not belong.

The second volume, *Facing Globalization in the Himalayas*, includes 16 chapters, plus an introduction, that are organized into five parts: 'Shifting Horizons of Belonging'; 'Migrant Experiences in South Asia and Beyond'; 'Creating Transnational Belonging'; 'Globality and Activist Experience'; and 'National Reconfigurations'. The editors open the volume with an introduction that takes on the term 'globalization', suggesting that it is best treated as a processual rather than categorical descriptor that characterizes a shift in the density and rapidity of exchange (p. 4-5). In turn, they argue, we can analyze responses to globalization as processes, which they see as falling into four broad categories: universalization; particularism; cultural reform; and revivalism (p. 6-7).

The forces of globalization are considered as they appear in the geographic Himalayas – touching on Christianization, Buddhist revivalism, protests against power projects, the politics of language, and state-level political change – as well as in diaspora. One interesting contrast to the first volume is that many of the chapters rely on comparative approaches, and this seems to work better for belonging as an analytical frame. Sara Shneiderman, for example, compares the experiences of Thangmi migrants in Nepal and in India and argues that attention to the ways in which they belong in both places brings clarity to the relative advantages they have in each: property and cultural

resources in Nepal, but social inclusion and political resources in India (p. 69). Similarly, Mitra Pariyar, Bal Gopal Shrestha, and David N. Gellner compare Nepali communities in the UK and Sikkim, illustrating how state policies contribute in different ways to impeding a full sense of belonging. Taking a different approach, Michael Hutt considers belonging as an explanator in his analysis of the divergent outcomes for the monarchies of Bhutan and Nepal, arguing that it was the centrality of the monarch in Nepal's polity that led to the demise of the institution in the 'new' Nepal (p. 441).

Several chapters focus on the experience of migrants abroad, and the concept of belonging seems to be a natural fit for these cases. Tristan Bruslè examines the 'layers of belonging' (p. 162) – national, regional, caste, and professional – that shape the experiences of Nepali migrants in India and Qatar and considers how, on the one hand, inherited senses of belonging shape experiences work abroad, and on the other hand how experiences abroad shape understandings of belonging upon return. In a refreshing and insightful chapter, Sondra L. Hausner shifts the focus away from the burdens of inherited attachments and illustrates how the agency of migrants in developing new forms of belonging can be impeded by state policies where they work. Taking the case of Nepali nurses in the UK, Hausner argues that they often prioritize belonging as a professional, but that restrictive policies – both in Nepal and in the UK – impede this. In a similar vein, Bandita Sijapati offers an excellent chapter on the experiences of young Nepali migrants to the United States, highlighting how their experiences 'have led Nepali youths to harbor a growing sense of "being in America" but not "belonging to America"' (p. 234). This has led many of them to 'nourish non-belonging' in the United States, leading them to engage more seriously with Nepali social networks in the United States as well as social and political activities in Nepal from afar (p. 257).

One of the most appealing aspects of the concept of belonging is that it allows us to incorporate into our analyses the immaterial, affective dimensions of social life that we all know are of critical importance. Interestingly, however, one dynamic that emerges at different points in the two volumes is the role of the mundane – especially state policy – in structuring the possibilities of belonging. As we move forward, it will be useful to interrogate the interplay of these two registers of social life

more thoroughly. What is clear for the moment, however, is that the editors and contributors have started an important conversation in Himalayan Studies with these two volumes. *Belonging* does in many ways seem to stand as an antidote to essentializing and de-humanizing analytical frameworks, and an antidote is all the more urgently needed as restrictive forms of analysis are used to fuel the expansion of exclusionary politics in all corners of the world.

## **Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India: From Warfare to Welfare?**

By Mona Bhan. London, Routledge 2014, ISBN: 978-0-415-81980-0 (hbk), 978-1-315-88986-3(ebk), 232 pages, 95 Pounds

Reviewed by Radhika Gupta

Scholarship on militarization in Kashmir has predominantly focused on the Kashmir Valley. While the political and ethical imperatives underlying this thrust are necessary and crystal clear, there has been an unwitting and unintentional contribution towards reproducing the discursive hegemony of the Kashmir Valley on the rest of the state, particularly Ladakh. It is this representational neglect that the politics of recognition of Ladakhis draws upon in large measure. Turning the gaze away from the Kashmir Valley, while drawing upon its experience analytically, Mona Bhan's book is a welcome contribution to an analysis of militarization and counterinsurgency operations in Ladakh, which has experienced steady militarization since the partition and even more so after the Kargil War in 1999. Bhan unravels the Indian state's attempts to assert sovereignty in Kashmir not only 'through exceptional forms of violence' but also through humanitarian strategies to kindle legitimacy in what it considers to be alienated, potentially seditious border populations. Through an ethnographic focus on the Brogpas, a 'quasi-Buddhist' ethnic minority community living in close proximity to the line of control (LoC) between India and Pakistan, in Kargil district, Bhan examines state-making and identity politics in Kargil after the war and the establishment of a post-war political economy. She seeks to unpack the 'complex relationship between democracy, counterinsurgency and citizenship' (p. 17). The chapters zoom in and out from four Brogpa villages where she conducted anthropological fieldwork to Kargil district and Ladakh as a whole. While this makes for a somewhat choppy narrative style, it allows Bhan to offer an incisive overall critique of the Indian army's humanitarian programs of 'heart warfare' that mark a shift in counterinsurgency strategies after the Kargil War. While this is really the central argument of the book building upon securitization literature in the US, the first three chapters examine the

consolidation of Brogpa identity within the broader politics of recognition in Kargil. Bhan offers an account of how the regional politics of identity contributes to the incorporation of border populations like the Brogpas into the state's security regime.

The book can be read as divided into two parts. In the first three chapters, Bhan counters popular stereotypes that attribute Brogpa marginality to their relative isolation and remoteness, arguing that they were marginalized by successive political regimes in Ladakh (p. 31) -- from the assimilationist policies of Ladakhi kings in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to their incorporation into the security regime after the 1999 war. She also traces the cultural reification of Brogpa identity in the context of the communalization of Ladakh and deepening Buddhist-Muslim tension since the late 1980s. Bhan opens up the complicated relationship between 'religion' and 'culture', which are being debated and contested among other ethnic groups in Ladakh. In the case of the Brogpas, this tension led to an internal fragmentation between Muslim and Buddhist Brogpas, which facilitated the military's practices of differential citizenship in a wider context of a greater suspicion of Muslims in Ladakh, a theme that Bhan returns to in chapter four. Brogpas invoked pervasive racialized stereotypes of being the last pristine Aryans to cement their cultural difference. While this successfully reified Brogpa identity, it failed to secure them political representation in the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (Kargil) given the politics of numbers and their quasi-Buddhist identity in a Muslim majority district. Their attempts to stake claims to the Hill Council through the deployment of 'alternative political idioms' that drew upon tropes of loyalty and responsibility for Indian border security too did not translate into inclusive citizenship. Internal communal and ethnic politics as much as the political economies spawned by the post-war state security setup compel a continued reliance on the military for livelihoods even though the locus for the realization of inclusive citizenship is ultimately the civil state administration. The book provides an intimate ethnography of the impact of militarization on everyday life and the 'routinized appropriation of villagers for projects of defense' (p.100) through employment as porters for the army. Bhan argues that the appropriation of civilian labour was not only indispensable to the

military but also offered the Brogpas new idioms of inclusion into the nation-state through tropes of duty, loyalty and national service. Yet the army's reach into village life also fractured community solidarity through patronage grounded in religious identification, as well as through the arbitrary distribution of resources. Bhan thus illuminates the complicated predicament of borderland dwellers in Ladakh.

In the second part of the book (chapters 4 and 5), Bhan turns her ethnographic gaze to the military. She provides an in-depth analysis of the Indian Army's *Sadbhavna* (Operation Goodwill) programs initiated in Ladakh two years after the Kargil war to 'win over their hearts and minds'. Through setting up schools, women empowerment centres, and medical care, Operation *Sadbhavna* incorporated development into two distinct paradigms of human security and counterinsurgency. Bhan deftly tracks how the Indian army combined ideologically incompatible state security and human security perspectives in order to further their counterinsurgency agenda without resort to exceptional violence. Yet it was precisely the pairing of two incompatible discourses that ultimately led to the tenuous success of Operation *Sadbhavna*. Through interviews with army personnel, Bhan offers valuable insight into their conflicted attempts to deal with the ideological contradiction embedded in such counterinsurgency strategies. She makes a valuable contribution to filling a general lacuna in borderlands studies, which with few exceptions, lacks the voices of soldiers and military officials. Yet she also complicates the overall critique of such counterinsurgency strategies in her relatively brief discussion of the complexity of civil-military interactions on the ground. As she puts it, 'the affective element in *Sadbhavna*'s outreach campaigns cannot be ignored' (p. 141) for the short-term benefits it brought to local populations. Bhan contends that 'because their [army] interactions with civilians became so normalized *Sadbhavna* established a robust foundation for an even deeper regulation of local desires, affiliations, and aspirations' (p. 142). In the last chapter, Bhan returns to a broader analysis of the relationship between militarization and democracy. She gestures to the 'uneasy relationship between the civil state and the military' (p. 26). The army's presence and monopoly on matters of national security often compromised and superseded the civil government's development initiatives. It also sustained anxiety among people about the loss of their



land and resources to the army. Yet, in order to distinguish themselves from the Kashmir Valley, Ladakhis have not articulated an overt demand for demilitarization. This, Bhan argues, 'limited the contours of democratic dissidence' (p. 179) and 'signalled the failure of democratic governance' (p. 185).

It is on this point that I don't fully agree with Bhan. Though the military succeeded in silencing overt political critique in Ladakh I am not sure it has succeeded in totally regulating their desires and aspirations. Passionate politics in Ladakh, especially around the Council elections, is perhaps a reflection of the perseverance with which Ladakhis continue to strive to attain a form of inclusive citizenship through institutions of democratic governance. They recognize and indeed articulate that the military, however benevolent it may be, cannot provide this. It is in the small bargains and victories the people of Ladakh have achieved, such as the recognition of Zoji-la road as a national highway, which Bhan herself mentions, that a subtler critique of militarization and counterinsurgency can be discerned. Though the Hill Council may have been accorded in tune with the logic of counterinsurgency (of countering potential unrest or radicalization), it has been seized by the people of Ladakh to articulate their hopes and visions evidenced in the intense sense of ownership over it. To that extent we perhaps need to be a little circumspect in painting Ladakh with the brushstroke of 'exception'. However, it is precisely in opening up this debate that this book must be commended for its excellent drawing out of the relationship between counterinsurgency, democracy and the politics of identity. Bhan's work is also notable for lending insight into the circulation of racial discourses in the region, analyses of which have been curiously missing in relation to caste and other axes of social stratification in the sociology and anthropology of India more generally. Finally, there are few pieces of scholarship that examine militarization from an ethnographic perspective. Bhan's work is a landmark contribution to this project. Here, its contribution goes much beyond Himalayan Studies and would be valuable for scholars in varied disciplines ranging from security studies to political science and anthropology.

## **The State of History Education and Research in Nepal**

By Yogesh Raj and Pratyoush Onta. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari. 2014. 96 pp.

## **The State of Sociology and Anthropology Teaching and Research in Nepal**

By Madhusudan Subedi & Devendra Uprety. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari. 2014. 94 pp.

## **The State of Geography Teaching and Research in Nepal: A Review and Reflection**

By Bhim Prasad Subedi Kathmandu: Martin Chautari. 2014. 78 pp.

Reviewed by David N. Gellner, University of Oxford

These three slim volumes were published together with a similar (though not identical) design, as part of a project of the Social Inclusion Research Fund (itself funded by SNV) in 2013-14. The aim was to follow up on the 'Strategic Plan for the Proposed Social Science Research Council in Nepal', written by Pitamber Sharma, Bal Gopal Vaidya, and Dwarika Nath Dhungel. Taken together these three volumes provide much information, including statistical data, about the state of these three closely linked subject areas. Without coming to any conclusions, all three touch on disciplinary existential crises (What is Geography? What is History for and what kind of History should Nepalis be doing and teaching? What are Anthropology and Sociology in the Nepalese context?). Together they give a snapshot of the history and current state of some of the key social sciences in Nepal. I will refer to the three volumes as H, SA, and G respectively.

All three volumes provide complete lists of completed PhDs in their sphere from Tribhuvan University (TU), numbers of faculty members in different campuses, details of curricula studied, principal academic journals published (with data on years of founding and publication), and classifications of the main kinds of article published therein. There is an interesting contrast, without a parallel in the other subjects, among

Sociology/Anthropology journals: on the one side, over two thirds of the articles published in the three journals, *Kailash*, *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, and *SINHAS*, are by non-Nepalis; on the other hand, in the other seven journals listed, only 11% of the published papers are by non-Nepalis (SA: 47). Nepali academic distaste for peer review is, Raj and Onta suggest, one factor at play here (H: 52).

From the lists of TU PhDs, we learn that there been have 15 PhDs in Geography, 27 in Sociology and Anthropology, and 63 in History (slightly different figures are given in a comparative table in H, p. 18, which adds the information that 58 PhDs have been completed in Political Science). There are 26 Geography teachers at TU (11 of these in the Dept of Education) and a further 53 in constituent campuses within the Kathmandu Valley (G: 44). The equivalent figures for Sociology and Anthropology are 22 and 38 (SA: 38), and for History 27 (9 in the Education Dept) and 80 (H: 12-13). There are 180 full-time History teachers in all TU campuses throughout the country, compared to 182 in Geography and 79 in Sociology/Anthropology (H: 12, G: 42, SA: 54-5).

These figures might suggest that of the three subjects it is History or Geography that is in the best health, but other indicators suggest that this is far from the case. Frustratingly, only G gives details on student enrolments. But it has long been known, since Pratyoush Onta has frequently written on it, that History is in crisis, with few students applying and those that do so, not being interested in or capable of research, a worrying trend that will, over time, see the necessary skills for the interpretation of Nepal's past wither and die. By contrast, at least within the Central Department in TU, Sociology and Anthropology have been able to restrict their entry requirements and be quite selective in who they take, because a degree in those subjects is seen as a passport to desirable jobs working in aid and development projects. Unfortunately, this is not documented either in H or in SA.

It is not only on this point that one would have wished for deeper collaboration between the authors of these three books. The presentation of parallel data in identical ways, and using the same methodology, would have paid dividends. Thus, Raj and Onta point out that, despite the languishing state of history within the academy, it is flourishing outside of it, with a burgeoning non-professionalized and amateur sphere in which local, folk, clan, caste, and ethnic group

histories are being excavated and published (H: 3, 55, 66). Whatever methodological reservations one may have about this, over all it is surely a trend to be celebrated and engaged with. In the same way there is also an enormous amount of self-publishing on ritual, festivals, kin practices, and so on – often in the very same publications. But this aspect is not discussed in SA.

Another place where more cooperation between the authors would have been good is the question of regional bias in academic production. G brings out the lack of academic attention paid to the Tarai. Table V demonstrates that of 126 articles published in geographical journals in Nepal, only 7.1% focused on the Tarai, whereas 14.3% related to the Mountain region and 51% to the Hill region (G: 31). A similar bias exists when looking at the focus of Master's theses (G: 38). Unfortunately, the other two volumes analyse the contributions to the relevant academic journals by topic, but not by geographic region. It is highly likely that Anthropology/Sociology and History are equally guilty of, relatively speaking, neglecting the region that is so crucial to the future of the country.

There are plenty of nuggets hidden away in these books. For example, the role that the Jesuits once played in getting academic research going in Nepal is illustrated by the fact that the first History PhD was Ludwig Stiller's (1970), while the first in Anthropology and Sociology was Cap Miller's (1987). (The first in Geography was by Chandra Bahadur Shrestha in 1980.) M. Subedi & Uprety observe that "Most of the TU authorities do not appear to know that sociology and anthropology are two different subjects. They generally say 'department of sociology'" (SA: 56). Now that the Central Department has indeed split into two departments presumably the concerned authorities have come to know that they are separate. But what have been the implications for the many smaller dependent departments that do not have the manpower to go one way or the other?

B.P. Subedi remarks that "The knowledge and understanding of the geographic world is Eurocentric. In the social landscape, white people and occidental knowledge have been respected above other people (e.g. Afro-Asian) and oriental knowledge" (G: 54). This is undoubtedly true. Sources in English are taken to be authoritative, even when the evidence base is weak; there are powerful structural reasons why this

perception is deeply embedded. I have often found myself begging my Nepali PhD students to make use of their comparative advantage (being fully literate, supposedly, in the Nepali language) and to consult and cite Nepali-language sources, rather than always seeking the latest, but not necessarily best informed, sources in English.

A problem that all three books discuss is research funding and the remuneration of teachers (SA: 62). B.P. Subedi quotes an earlier review saying that “in this country Geographers are doing well but geography is not” (G: 52) and concludes that in the years since 1990 Geography has been “stagnant” (G: 62). H is rather more optimistic than one might have expected, knowing the authors’ previous publications, and lays out a number of intellectual directions in which History might and should move over future years. Of the three volumes, only SA hints at the political context within which academic production is forced to operate in Nepal, with mentions of ‘rumors’ and the blunt assertion that “In most of the colleges it was found that faculty members are hired based on political pressure brought upon the campus authorities. Meritocracy has virtually vanished... TU Service Commission has not been able to implement its duty of ensuring fairness and quality in faculty hiring” (SA: 56-7). The wider context of the marketization of education, fees, student numbers, affiliations, and the bribes and connections required to obtain affiliations are not touched on at all.

In short, these books are useful as reference works, contain much of value, and are an important step forward. Indeed, by an irony that was perhaps unavoidable, they themselves illustrate many of the trends and pressures faced by intellectuals and academics in Nepal today. They do not, even taken together—and how could they?—comprise the in-depth and comprehensive history and analysis of tertiary education in Nepal that is urgently needed.



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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